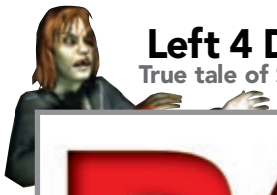
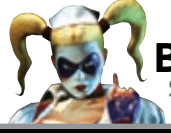


Left 4 Dead
True tale of Survival

New GeForce Cards
Worth the dough? One is!



Batman: Arkham Asylum
Secrets from inside the crazy house

PC GAMER

Dragon Age: Origins

Better on PC?
Heck yeah!

HANDS-ON!
Braid
Overlord II
Operation Flashpoint 2

★ THREE NEW GAMES! ★

BATTLEFIELD IS BACK!

BATTLEFIELD 1943
The online classic reborn!

BATTLEFIELD HEROES
Why free gaming is the future!

BAD COMPANY 2
Single-player Battlefield?!

REVIEWED
- Watchmen
- Chronicles of Riddick 2
- Tom Clancy's EndWar

+ 7 more final verdicts!

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PC GAMER

MAY 2009

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PLEASE NOTE

Screen shots and other artwork in this pdf have been downsampled and compressed. For the most accurate representation of game artwork please refer to your hard copy of PC Gamer.

HIT ME WITH YOUR BEST SHOT

An old friend of mine once wrote in a similar space that you haven't arrived until you get your first piece of hate mail.

Well, folks, it looks like I've arrived.

The first cut came in the form of a fiery missive from the aptly named "Quebec Dragon." Actually, it wasn't all *that* flamey. I hate to stereotype, but our self-monikered Mr. Dragon actually behaved in typical French Canadian fashion, sending the magazine a very measured email questioning some of what I proudly proclaimed in my first Ed Note at *PC Gamer*. The highlight for me: "I know your new editor in chief meant well, but shame on him."

But it wasn't until the next issue that a few longtime readers began sharpening their pitchforks. "Now wait just a cotton-pickin' minute here," began Grumpy Jim. "The FNG Gary somebody comes in and Desslock, Norm, Mr. Mahood, and even Dan's columns are gone?! WTF?" A few days later, Stephen Simons took umbrage with our salacious cover: "Strike one, a nude picture of Alma, barely covering her naughty bits with some strategically placed lettering…I know this isn't the first time there's been a bit of gore-porn in the hallowed pages of *PC Gamer*, but this is definitely the worst." But my favorite comment of the month came from the oh-so-blunt Chad Brown: "Get rid of this clown before he drives the magazine into the ground."

Ouch!

Now, lest you think I'm a glutton for punishment—a depraved masochist who derives some sick thrill from your stones and arrows—let me explain myself. I'm bustin' with pride over what we're doing in *PC Gamer*. In fact, I declare this issue the best one yet of the three that I've helmed. Especially exciting to me is our Eyewitness section, which now takes up almost half our magazine, and includes more original and exclusive game coverage than our previous Eyewitness and Previews sections combined. (Which, by the way, we've done this issue. Gorge yourself on gorgeous previews, done up in a style that can only be delivered in print, but no longer cordoned off in a sad little preview ghetto.) It's really, really great, if I do say so myself. I'm also pleased as punch with all of our usual departments, including our hard-hitting reviews, stellar hardware coverage, brilliant cover story, and handy how-tos. But you've heard me blather on about how good this magazine is for several months in a row now. So why not sharpen those pencils and see if you can top Chad, Stephen, and the Quebec Dragon by sending me your best hate mail. Go ahead, I can take it. After all, I've arrived—and I'm here to stay.

You are Rorschach. I am generic mercenary No. 742. Your job: Hit me with everything you've got. Then we'll finish up with a cathartic hug.

GARY

/// GARY STEINMAN, EDITOR IN CHIEF ///

THE PLAYLIST 0509

GARY STEINMAN EDITOR IN CHIEF

When the entire staff refused to play *Watchmen*'s offline co-op mode, Gary turned to the janitorial crew for help. They agreed, but for a price...which is why Gary is emptying trash cans instead of playing anything else.

LOGAN DECKER EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Although he built The Anchovy Project PC with a Core i7-965 proc and GeForce GTX 295 3D card to tackle the brawniest of games, Logan ended up spending most of the month playing *Braid*.

DAN STAPLETON REVIEWS EDITOR

Dan is cranking up the difficulty on the *Dawn of War II* campaign in search of a real challenge...and getting his squads one-shotted by Tyranid bosses. He needs better Wargear, and maybe some co-op backup.

EVAN LAHTI ASSOCIATE EDITOR

After a three-year hiatus, Evan returned to *Counter-Strike: Source*, playing cs_office exclusively. He boots up *Dawn of War II* when his K:D ratio dips, grateful that the Tyranids don't have access to AWPs or Deagles.

DAN FITZPATRICK LEAD DESIGNER

Dan thought he was first in line to download the *Quake Live* beta. Boy, was he wrong. After waiting seven hours in the download queue, Dan decided it would be a lot more fun to go "Quake Live" on the staff instead.

JOSH AUGUSTINE LEVEL 42 INTERN

Being in the *PC Gamer* offices is even more awesome than Josh had imagined, although he's still not convinced that dancing hourly to amuse the editors is "something all the other interns did".

Future MEDIA WITH PASSION

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THE LOVE IS GIVEN

The omission in March 2009's Strategic Command article really stung: Activision's *Battlezone* pioneered the amazing combination of real-time strategy with first-person shooting over 10 years ago, and did it amazingly. Take over any vehicle you own, or foot slog around to snipe enemy pilots and take *their* tanks—beautiful! All while building a typical RTS base, resource gathering, and teching. It's a game to study and learn from, in my opinion. Not only was it one of my favorite games, but *PC Gamer*'s constant praise of it back when it was relatively unknown was one of the reasons my early subscription to your magazine became permanent. Please give it some love! —DEATHYPOO

/// A shooter and a looter, with a high-tech scooter—*Battlezone!* ///

"My initial gasp was soon followed by my fangirl squee!"

GO FILK YOURSELF

Jonathan Coulton's music (featured in the February 2009 issue of *PC Gamer*) is generally called filk music. *PC Gamer* readers will like much of it. Initially it was created around print science fiction, but it has since branched out. There is now a good bit of filk computer- and computer game-related music. There is music to cover whatever way you like to kill your electronic enemies.

"Banned from Argo" by Leslie Fish (www.lesliefish.com) is the quintessential filk song. It's about what the crew of the *Enterprise* do on their day off. Warriors have been singing about what they do for a long time, so it's no surprise that there are *lots* of war game songs. "I Fought the Troll" by Tom Smith (www.tomsmithonline.com) is one place to start. For the WWII crowd, there's lots of period stuff out there, but their titles can be deceptive. For example, "Panzerkampf" is about what's waiting *for* a Panzerkampf. —WAYNE GERDES

/// Underneath the T-shirt, Jonathan Coulton is *completely naked.* ///

MO' ON J.CO.

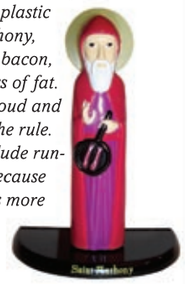
While looking through the February issue, I turned the page to find Jonathan Coulton looking back at me. My initial gasp was soon followed by my fangirl squee! The funny looks given by co-workers notwithstanding, the squees continued periodically for the next few minutes as the article was read. Thank you, *PC Gamer*, for making my otherwise dull lunch period and day wonderful! —KATE BUKOWSKI

Well stop yer grinnin' and drop yer linen, Kate, because we've got a very special message for you from the man himself (see left)!

POLICY SCHMOLICY

Didn't *PC Gamer* used to have a policy where the Game of the Year couldn't win an award as the best of its genre as well? With *Fallout 3* being the game of the year, I think we can all assume that it's also the best RPG of the year. —JEREMIAH BECKHAM

We did have that policy once, but when an RPG was declared the overall best game of the year and the second-best RPG of the year was declared the best RPG of the year, our small plastic effigy of Saint Anthony, the patron saint of bacon, began to weep tears of fat. Message received loud and clear. We ditched the rule. Also, we didn't include runners-up this year because we wanted to focus more on the winners.



LETTERS

In a sense, *PC Gamer* is *your* magazine. In the sense that while we work long hours in a damp, gross, concrete-lined root cellar underneath a single fluorescent bulb that flickers constantly and makes electrical snapping noises like a Taser being fired by a cockroach so that we can produce this awesome monthly publication, you can write us letters and we will print them. Maybe. letters@pcgamer.com.

CHATLOG

// PC Gamer used to review classic, turn-based, hex-map war games like Korsun Pocket and Squad Battles: Vietnam (both awarded Editor's Choice). I know the turn-based, hex-map war games aren't the most popular genre, but there are still a lot of gamers who love them—publishers like HPS Simulations and Matrix games still crank out fantastic strategy games that are unique experiences available only to those of us who refuse to buy an Xbox 360.—Eric W

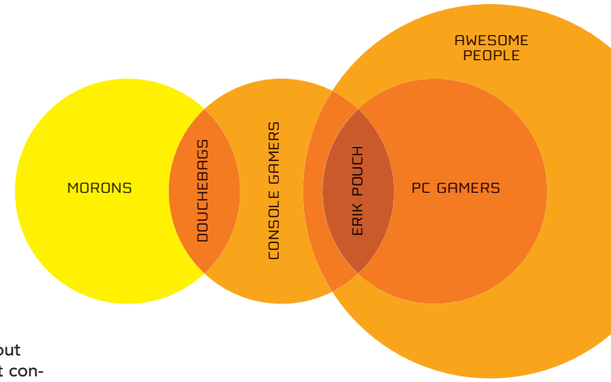
// Microsoft is not going to get my account or my credit card, nor will I purchase carnival money to play games. Bethesda made a bad mistake on using Games for Windows Live as the sole retailer of their expansion packs.
—David Hicks

// In your preview of Jumpgate: Evolution you mentioned that you would like to see mech games come back. I recently found an old copy of the game Heavy Gear II—the game has so much depth and is so much fun even though it is old.
—Tim Camey

PC GAMER GETS A TIME OUT

I've been a PC gamer longer than the team has been around. Probably longer than most of the *PC Gamer* staff has been alive. I got addicted back when PC gaming meant writing your own text-based adventures in BASIC. And here's something else: I'm also a console gamer.

I understand a little good-natured ribbing and competition. But the outright insults are uncalled for. This last issue I hardly made it two pages without my hackles going up over a dig, not at console gaming but at console gamers. Obviously, as a magazine dedicated to the PC, you feel the justified right to flaunt the PC's superiority. But don't assume that because I enjoy *Rock Band* and *LittleBigPlanet* that I am a moron. —ERIK POUCH



We don't think you're a moron. In fact, we had the folks in accounting run the numbers on their spreadsheets and, as the accompanying diagram returned to us clearly illustrates, you're awesome!

ACCIDENTS WILL HAPPEN

Does Evan Lahti really want transporter accidents in a *Star Trek* game? Seriously? Let's go through a scenario to illustrate the problem. Star date: 2016, and being the avid Trekkie you are, you bought the *Star Trek* MMO as soon as it came out in 2011. After five years of dedication to Starfleet, beginning as an ensign aboard a science vessel patrolling the neutral zone and working your way up to captain of your own ship, you find yourself preparing to accept a promotion to head the Starfleet Academy. Finally, your character has achieved his potential in life—his calling, if you will—and you feel like all those years of rigor and discipline have finally paid off.

After the emotional goodbyes to your first officer and the rest of your crew, you're running behind schedule, so you do the one thing that you've refused to do on so many occasions: Use the transporter. Using it just this once is fine; I mean, statistically it's the safest way to travel, right?

What happens next is hard to explain. An anomaly caused by an explosion from a mining colony on Mars sucked a substantial amount of energy from your starship just as it was beaming you down. Your screen fades to black and the words "Game Over" brand themselves on the inside of your skull. You sit there for the next half-hour, in dead silence, unable to talk, unable to move. Five years of dedication to Starfleet—of your life—have led to absolutely nothing.

So, are transporter accidents worth it? Absolutely not. —RICHARD HARRISON

We admit it would be tough on the player behind your scenario, Richard, but you're forgetting one absolutely crucial detail: It would be a laugh-riot for everybody else.

WIN A COPY OF BATTLEFORGE

Read the review on page 56, then email contests@pcgamer.com with "Card-sharp!" in the subject line, and include your full name and mailing address in the message body. Contest ends May 15, 2009. See full contest rules on page 95.

PRTSCN

Is it a rave? A mosh pit? A thawed-out skating rink? Or just another liquidation sale at Circuit City? Ryan M. of Rochester, New York, sent us this haunting screenshot from *Left 4 Dead* that captures lethal zombies in a rare moment of quiet and reflection.

Send your favorite screenshots, photos of your case mods and gaming setups, and anything else that you think we might find interesting that doesn't involve your naughty bits or anybody else's, and if we print them in the magazine, you'll not only become a permanent part of the PC Gamer Historical Archives, but you'll also be immune to zombie infections for three whole hours!

LEFT 4 DEAD

SURVIVAL

SAVE THE LAST BULLET FOR YOURSELF—THIS TIME THE ZOMBIES WIN

TICK TOCK In Survival mode you never get to play as a zombie, but you do compete against the foes on your Steam friends list. Their Survival times will be posted to an online leaderboard, and as you're playing the game you'll be notified when you've beaten a friend's best time for that map. That'll get your competitive juices flowing!

Calling *Left 4 Dead*'s new mode "Survival" is a lot like naming a game "Stay Dry" and then pinning players to the wall with a high-pressure fire hose.

It's exactly like that, actually, except that Valve's hose is hooked directly into a bottomless reservoir of zombies. No matter what you do, no matter how good you are at slaying the undead, they will never stop, and there is no safe room. Sooner rather than later, the zombies will kill you and your friends. Ordinarily, I'd consider the inevitability of my own death a depressing thought, but after playing a few hours' worth of Survival at Valve's offices, I can't think of a more entertaining way to die.

Valve designed Survival mode with quick play in mind: You can jump in and instantly be neck-deep in hungry zombies without having to fight your way through an obligatory half-hour of infested corridors and sewers first. For our first round, our team (me, Evan, and a couple of Valve ringers) loaded up a modified version of a map from the No Mercy campaign where the survivors are holding out until the elevator arrives. This time, however, the elevator wasn't coming.

We were well-equipped, at least—we had the advanced set of weapons, and this version of the map was littered with many more ammo stashes, pipe bombs, Molotovs, pills, gas cans, and propane tanks (but only one med pack per player) than in the campaign. Our Valve advisors warned us not to be stingy; without liberal use of explosives, you won't last long enough to use them all anyway. Up until we pushed the button to call the elevator (Valve says they have their best people trying to come up with a reason the survivors would want to push a button that does nothing but call the zombies) the map seemed small—almost claustrophobically so, with most areas closed off with locked doors you can't bash or shoot through.

(Continued on page 14)

+++ WWW.PCGAMER.COM +++

/// The church in Death Toll is an excellent perch for hunters in Versus. ///

(Continued from page 12)

Then zombies came crashing in, blowing the doors open and, in some cases, smashing through brick walls like the Kool-Aid Man, opening up new areas with extra deposits of weapons. At first it was a zombie rush like any other in the game—15 of the 16 Survival maps are variations on the "crescendo" events and finale stands from the four campaigns—so we had a pretty good idea of what to expect. But over the next five minutes, the waves of zombies gained an intensity that we'd never seen before. In the campaigns and Versus mode, the number of boss infected is limited to four, but in Survival the number began to rise, creating situations where three hunters would attack at once, smoker tongues grab at you from all angles, all while a boomer blinds you. There's no guarantee of a 20-second reprieve before they respawn, either. If that weren't enough, about every two minutes that menacing tank music kicked in and compelled us to abandon our relatively safe corner. This is *Left 4 Dead* at its most frantic, adrenaline-pumping best, with little or no lull in the action.

IT WAS AROUND THE six-minute mark that the AI Director decided to stop playing Mr. Nice… AI Director, and sent two tanks after us at once, plus at least a half-dozen boss infected as backup. We managed to catch both tanks in a Molotov and lasted long enough to see them go down, but were finished off by a pack of hunters. Beginner's luck kept us alive for a full seven minutes—longer than most rounds, we soon found.

Next we tried out the one new map, Lighthouse, and naturally went straight for the top of the titular tower. From there we could see the entirety of the small map: water to one side, a cliff face on two sides, and a road blocked off by the type of fence that zombies can't resist climbing over. Our plan was to camp on the lighthouse and the roof of the adjacent building—a strategy that kept us alive for all of two minutes before a tank scaled the lighthouse wall and punched half the team off the roof for instant kills. We found we had better luck bunkering down in the generator room next to the tower, but even then lasting more than five minutes was an epic challenge.

We set our personal bests playing a map based on a Death Toll scene that takes place in the streets of a town. The minigun certainly helped to cut down waves of zombies as they clambered over the large barricade of debris that blocks off the street—even tanks can't stand that firepower for long—but hunters and smokers kept breaking down doors behind us, making sure we never felt safe. When we were finally overwhelmed, eight minutes had passed. It's a time that will probably be doubled by the hardcore players the very day the free update comes out sometime this spring, but we're proud to have withstood the power of Valve's zombie-hose for that long. /// DAN STAPLETON ///

VERSUS PART II

As promised, this update will add Versus mode support to the two campaigns that didn't have it at launch: Death Toll and Dead Air. These are actually slightly modified versions of the campaign maps, though the changes are subtle. "It's not, 'Oh my gosh, we put a whole new building here.' It's more like we moved this thing four feet to the right and it made all the difference in the world," says Valve writer Chet Faliszek. We noticed a few tweaks, like a hole in the roof of the church crescendo event where a smoker tongue could snag an unsuspecting survivor, but nothing dramatic.

Even though we'd each played through Death Toll many times, it's a whole new experience when you know there are four real players out there plotting against you…with you scheming to destroy them in return. I was particularly proud of nailing Faliszek with a hunter leap off the steeple of the church for some epic damage just as he emerged from the safe room.

/// Valve's zombie factory has been working overtime to supply the many boss infected you'll face at a time in Survival. ///

SERVICE SELLS

PRICE CUTS AND CONSTANT UPDATES HELP VALVE DEFY THE SALES CURVE

Cut your prices and you'll see a sharp rise in sales. Serve your customers and you'll be rewarded with significant spikes in revenue. Sounds obvious, eh? Problem is, the game industry doesn't always follow these basic principles, according to Valve's president Gabe Newell.

But it's not always the industry's fault. In his keynote speech at the recent industry DICE Summit, Newell conceded that his Steam distribution portal lets him experiment with pricing in a way that retail simply can't accommodate. Steam has also allowed Valve to continually update their games, following a service model that defies the traditional ship-it-and-move-on mentality.

A perfect example of this: *Team Fortress 2*. Since its launch 18 months ago, *TF2* has been updated more than 60 times, including everything from minor tweaks and bug fixes to major additions like new character classes. The best news: freebies, like map packs and guest passes, actually spur sales.

PRICE CUTS ALSO MAKE a huge difference. When Valve ran a weekend promotion that cut *Left 4 Dead*'s price in half, sales jumped by 3,000 percent. "We sold more in revenue [that] weekend than we did when we launched the product," Newell said. "We were driving a huge uptick in revenue and attracting new customers." Third-parties also benefited from a holiday sale, during which units sold increased by 600 percent. The most interesting takeaway: The deeper the discount, the more revenue the third-parties pocketed.

A common concern about variable pricing: It will confuse customers and cannibalize retail sales. Not true, said Newell. In fact, brick-and-mortar sales weren't affected at all by the Steam price cuts.

/// Valve games' strong sales pulse continues. The 2/13 *L4D* sale also saw a 1,600 percent increase in new Steam customers from the prior weekend. ///

THE 17-WORD PREVIEW*: FUEL

Off-road Dune buggies and ATVs over deserted USA as barn-busting tornadoes and blizzards roam. Thanks, global warming.

*A purée of pure fact, sans silly details. Hyphenated words count as one, 'cause we said so.

ILLUSTRATION BY DAVID LYTTLETON

the spy

Not even the threat of the burlap sack over the head and extradition can stop The Spy's relentless pursuit of hearsay, and this month comes the report that **2K Games** is building ***BioShock 2* multiplayer.** That's right, the world of Rapture will be crowded with others. The Spy believes 2K Games is splitting the *BioShock 2* load between studios. **2K Marin** is listed as the developers of *BioShock 2*, but 2K Boston—the developer of the original *BioShock*—is looking for a Lead Multiplayer Engineer with "the skills and passion for building world-class multiplayer experiences." It's common practice for publishers to divide single-player and multiplayer portions of games, and that's the likely scenario here. The Spy has handed his 2K dossier over to *PC Gamer* for further investigation.

■

Judicious use of a fluorite lens and a ceramic piezoelectric microphone leads The Spy to believe that ***Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*** will be out this year. In the parlance of the bean counters, it's out in "Q4," which stretches from September all the way into the end of the year. With recent *CoD* games pitching up well in time for Christmas, we'd expect this one to be no different.

■

The Spy also expects this year's August Blizzcon to bring forth information on the next **Blizzard MMOG.** *World of Warcraft*'s lead designer, Jeff Kaplan, has already moved on to this as-yet unnamed title.

■

Square Enix's attentions on **Eidos** have not gone unnoticed by The Spy. The Japanese giant, known for such games as *Final Fantasy*, is looking to diversify its output, and buying up the seemingly always troubled Eidos lands, um, squarely in its plan. Spy out.

/// For all his kevlar and brawn, no amount of special breakfasts from Alfred will help you survive head-on assaults in *Arkham Asylum*. Gliding in from above to pick off guards, then grappling-hooking away produced the best results. ///

BATMAN
Arkham Asylum

PAUL DINI SCRIBBLES IN THE MADHOUSE

No one pens a better Batman than Paul Dini. A veteran scribe at Warner Bros., Dini has nabbed five Emmys, two of which were for our favorite classic cartoon, *Batman: The Animated Series*. Paul has also contributed writing, editing, or producing roles on TV series like *Lost*, *Batman Beyond*, *Justice League Unlimited*, *Animaniacs*, and *Superman: The Animated Series*. Few minds know the Dark Knight better, which is why we're grateful to have Dini behind Rocksteady's upcoming batgame, *Arkham Asylum*, as well as the opportunity to talk about his role in creating what looks to be far and away the best Batman game *ever*. /// EVAN LAHTI ///

ROLL CALL

Who's confirmed, and who we'd expect (or hope) to see revealed in Arkham Asylum.

CONFIRMED

- [x] The Joker
- [x] Harley Quinn
- [x] Oracle
- [x] Commissioner Gordon
- [x] The Riddler
- [x] Killer Croc
- [x] Mr. Zsasz

FINGERS CROSSED

- [ ] Mr. Freeze
- [ ] Two-Face
- [ ] Poison Ivy
- [ ] The Ventriloquist
- [ ] Solomon Grundy

PC GAMER: Is writing Batman for a game any different than writing him for comics, TV, or film?

PAUL DINI: There are certain things around him that are always constant, such as his world and his mythology, his look, and the motivation that keeps him fighting crime, but there are differences in how to write him. When you're writing a comic or a novel about Batman, it's very much a writer's medium—you can go on at length and you can use the written word to flesh out his world a little bit more. But especially in a game, whenever he puts on the mask, he's going to be very terse. The more he says, the worse off the character becomes; he's a character whose actions speak louder than words.

Why Arkham? It's an ideal, haunted house hub for gameplay in the Batman universe, but how do you make it work?

Arkham is just as much a character in this game as Batman and the Joker. It's scarier than hell—you don't want to be here. It's so intricate—it's an old estate that takes up most of an island that was first converted into a sanitarium, then it was a madhouse, then it became a hospital for the criminally insane, but it's still a weird, old gothic madhouse. You get the idea that for as many hi-tech instruments and for all the scientific advances, this is a place of ghosts and shadows and madness. You just have an amazing feeling that comes from the place—it's claustrophobic.

Yet the Joker doesn't seem to feel confined within Arkham...

Joker has gone beyond thinking of Arkham as a place where he's incarcerated—it's more like a world of unlimited potential for him. He's managed to gain control, and he's turned everything that could be beneficial or helpful in Arkham into a mockery of itself. He's transformed Arkham into a macabre, nightmarish funhouse where the doctors have been locked up and the patients are running around dressed as doctors. He's done this not only as a way of trapping Batman inside but also giving him the farewell party to end all farewell parties—one last, big, grand night where he's got to fight his way through and then confront the Joker for a special surprise at the very end.

/// Combo-heavy combat lets Bats transition among any foes that surround him in convenient circles. ///

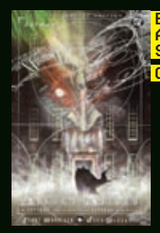
What do Kevin Conroy (Batman) and Mark Hamill (Joker) bring to their characters, especially in a space where their dialogue can be more mature?

Listening to Mark be the Joker again, he's spot-on like the Joker of old, but in terms of the mood of the place and the more menacing quality of gameplay, he might've taken the Joker's voice a bit farther into madness. There's an even more dangerous quality to him. Mark still does the wonderful shifts that really make that character so great, from being just diabolical to being friendly and innocent. Kevin—he's the ultimate Batman. As an actor he brings so much to the character. There are some moments in the game where Batman is really shaken to the core and has to examine what he's all about—he has to go into his own mind to examine whether or not he's succumbing to madness. He always brings something new to Batman. Kevin will always be Batman to me.

/// Wanna learn more about Harley Quinn? Batman can find audio tapes of villains' therapy sessions for insight into their origins. ///

PAUL'S PICKS

Study up...here's four good graphic novels to help you get get geared up for the game.

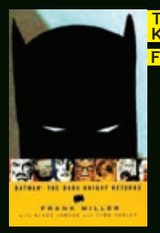


BATMAN: ARKAM ASYLUM: A SERIOUS HOUSE ON SERIOUS EARTH
Grant Morrison

"It's not a literal translation of the game, but it's a book that you can really lose yourself in the writing and the history of the characters, and that's not really the same luxury that we have in doing a game. I'd point that to anyone that's looking for a primer on Batman."

MAD LOVE
Bruce Timm
Paul Dini

"It's a take on the Batman-Joker-Harley relationship, and a bit of that filters into the game, as well."



THE DARK KNIGHT RETURNS
Frank Miller

&

BATMAN: YEAR ONE
Frank Miller

"Classics."

VITALS **DEVELOPER:** ROCKSTEADY STUDIOS **PUBLISHER:** EIDOS **RELEASE:** SUMMER 2009 **URL:** BATMANARKHAMASYLUM.COM

SCOUTING THE SCOUT

With weeks of bat-swinging and Bonk!-guzzling under our belts, we prod *Team Fortress 2* frontman Robin Walker for additional recon on the February class update

The Sandman

"A multi-purpose tool, and one that combos really well with teammates, especially Snipers. On offense it can prevent enemies getting away from your team's push, slow an oncoming uber, or help you stop an Engineer from repairing his sentry gun."

VALVE'S PREDICTION: A standard for defensive Scouts and harassers.

Bonk! Energy Drink

"Useful for getting past chokepoints on maps like Goldrush and Dustbowl. A Scout can push past the defensive line, hole up somewhere for a few seconds while they regain their speed, and then start harassing the enemy line from behind. Done well, they can cause enemy Snipers and Engineers a bunch of pain."

VALVE'S PREDICTION: Liquid getaway. Defenders may play more conservatively to prevent quick-caps.

Force-A-Nature

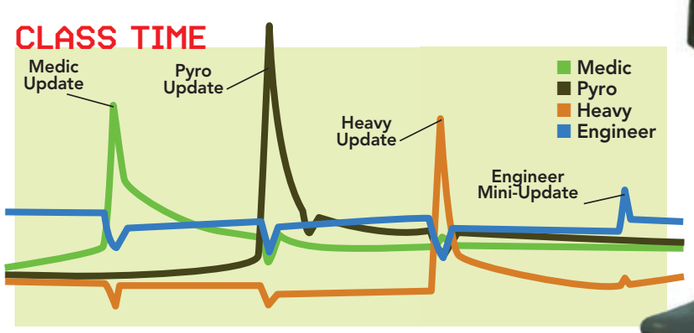
"The gun's knockback effect will save your life when an enemy Pyro is rushing you, or if you find yourself face to face with a Heavy. If you choose not to use The Sandman, the maneuverability you have with double-jump and the Force-A-Nature's kickback will allow you to take new routes and traverse large spaces without touching the ground."

VALVE'S PREDICTION: A Pyro repellant, and the weapon-of-choice for assassin/intel-running Scouts.

What Got Cut?

Two Scout unlockables struck out: Valve considered a **backpack** that allowed the class to pick up items (health/ammo/metal) and drop them in the field (something all characters could do in the original *TFC*). A **catcher's mitt** was also on the table; it would've let Scouts catch and store an enemy projectile, then throw it out at will.

CLASS TIME



/// Modeled here is the percentage of player time spent on each of *TF2*'s updated classes. Pyro peaked the most post-update, with Engineer dipping equally with each update. ///

AMERICA'S ARMY 3

ANOTHER ADVANCEMENT IN THE GAME OF WAR

Can 10 million digital draftees be wrong? There may be a lingering connotation that investing hours in a government-sponsored shooter is the gaming equivalent of filling your stomach with MRE rations every night when civilian grub is readily available, but we're pretty sure *America's Army 3* won't be standard-issue software, based on what we've seen.

The free-to-play PC-exclusive is the most ambitious iteration in the series yet. It runs on Unreal 3 tech, it'll integrate a fictional narrative into the single-player and multiplayer modes (clash of the vaguely-former-Soviet Bloc-sounding nations!), supports 13-on-13 adversarial play, will be distributed (and auto-patched) through Steam, and it's planned as a platform for continued development (not unlike Valve's updates for its multiplayer titles), meaning the Army will roll out quarterly expansions to introduce more occupational specialties (combat medic will be the first available), multiplayer maps, training, and story extensions.

On paper, that ain't bad for the $0.15 or so we're collectively paying in taxes to develop it. The gameplay has been tweaked to offer a greater sense of realism: A tracer round can be strategically placed in your magazine (tactically, it could let you know when you're running low on ammo—or fool your opponent into thinking you've run out if you slot it in the middle), full ballistic modeling will cause bullets to ricochet in an accurate manner, and educational-but-interesting quirks like an ally-healing system can now go wrong if you botch the procedure. But this isn't just about becoming a better killing machine: a robust player progress system quantifies your efforts into measurements of honor, selfless service, loyalty, and other army values en route to ranking up.

We marched away impressed with audio modeling, especially—it's nuanced enough to distinguish the sound of a bullet passing a few feet from your head from one that zips 30 feet away. Multiplayer feels like a familiar cross between *ArmA* and *Counter-Strike*—something that balances realism with a focus on conventionally strong level design and area-clearing, check-your-corners shooting.

/// EVAN LAHTI ///

AA So Far

- More than 9.8 million registered players across both games
- More than 240 million in-game hours played (nearly 25 hours per player, on average)
- 1.5 million click-thrus from the America's Army website to GoArmy.com
- According to the Army, as a result of medical training in the game, there have been two reported instances of players who have been first responders in accidents and have provided life-saving medical aid to the victims.
- A lightgun, coin-op arcade version of the game was created by GlobalVR in 2007, featuring eight training minigames.

/// Carried equipment affects your mobility. ///

/// Weapon training prepares players for the field. ///

VITALS :: **DEVELOPER:** U.S. ARMY **PUBLISHER:** U.S. ARMY **RELEASE:** SPRING 2009 **URL:** AMERICASARMY.COM

flash bang

FIVE FAST BROWSER-BASED FREEBIES

Bars of Black and White
Beware the barcodes! Escape the room in this low-rent, high-minded brain teaser.
snipr.com/c9pze

Closure
An elegant puzzler using light and shadow to create paths.
snipr.com/c9q4w

Gravity Hook
Swing-climb your way out of a mineshaft. Amazing 8-bit retro soundtrack.
snipr.com/c9q7y

Ultimate Vending Machine Challenge
No loose change? Don't let that stop you from nabbing a salty snack.
snipr.com/c9qer

Infinite Chamber
Cross from one side to the other. Then back again. And again. And again.
snipr.com/c9wa3

DRAGON AGE Origins

Who cares if it's multiplatform? BioWare's upcoming role-player will shine brightest on the PC.

THE BETTER ON PC CHECKLIST!

- ✔ Prettier on PC
- ✔ More features
- ✔ Mod it!
- ✔ Better controls
- ✔ PC heritage
- ✔ Because we say so!

VITALS
DEVELOPER: BIOWARE
PUBLISHER: EA
RELEASE: Q3 2009
URL: DRAGONAGE.COM

WHAT IS IT?

Epic party-based fantasy RPG with multiple story starting points.

WHY WE'RE EXCITED

Pausable, tactical combat. Single-character origin stories add genuine replayability. *Dragon Age* also has some of of the most mature side-plots we've seen (if the "Wrex" arc in *Mass Effect* stirred your moral conscience, get ready).

WHY IT'S BETTER ON PC

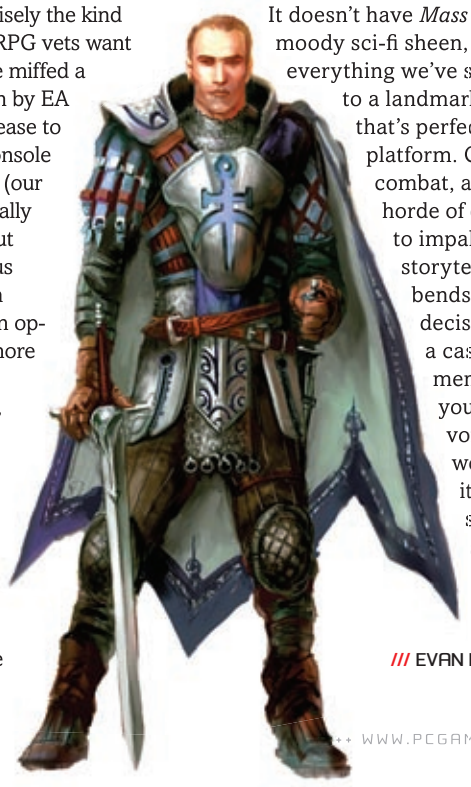
Strip out the fact that *Dragon Age*'s spiritual influence, *Baldur's Gate*, remains a treasured beacon of classic PC RPGs. Shrug off that the game's producer, Dan Tudge, told us directly that development is leading on the PC. In your hands, you can't imagine playing BioWare's *BG* reboot with anything but a mouse and full slab of keys in front of you.

When two dryads (evil trees!) are meleeing you with their branches, a goblin-like genlock is sniping arrows at your mage, and a 15-foot ogre is hurling a boulder at you (see above)—all of which we experienced in a recent playtest—you want a control system that lets you pull back the camera and deliberate over tactics, aim your area-of-effect fire spell to catch both dryads in stride, and juggle your four-character party's hotbar of spells, buffs, and abilities to stay alive.

Managing an inventory, fiddling with a crafting system, flipping through a quest journal, and programming combat macros for your party members are precisely the kind of complex tools RPG vets want to play with. We're miffed a marketing decision by EA pushed the PC release to line up with the console version in autumn (our version was originally due this spring), but BioWare assured us that it'll only mean more polish and an opportunity to add more features (a battle arena tournament, please?) to the already ambitious role-player.

Otherwise, BioWare will roll out integrated sharing of user-created campaigns for the first time, meaning we're expecting a deep community of LOTR-lovin', machiminima-makin' modders to put forth great stuff with the promising tools *Origins* will have in place at launch. (A cutscene editor? Sold.)

WILL IT BE THE BEST BIOWARE GAME YET?



It doesn't have *Mass Effect*'s moody sci-fi sheen, but almost everything we've seen points to a landmark franchise that's perfect on our platform. Complex combat, an evil horde of dark things to impale, layered storytelling that bends with your decisions, and a cast of party members to let you pick favorites—we won't call it *KOTOR* sans lightsabers, but you get the idea.

/// EVAN LAHTI ///

BRAID

IT'S ABOUT TIME

/// *Braid* is a game about time. In fact, *Braid* does for time what *Portal* did for space, giving you the ability to manipulate it in all sorts of brain-twisting ways in order to solve a problem. You can stretch it, stop it, speed it up, reverse it, and even copy it over itself. ///

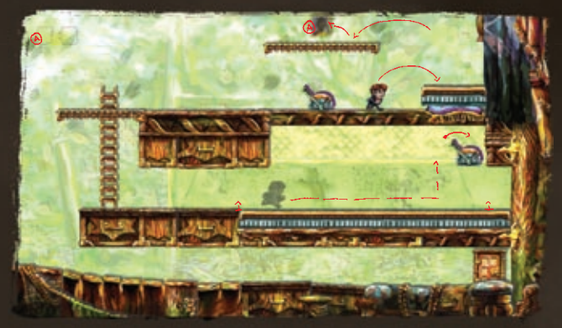
/// When tragedy befalls *Braid*'s diminutive, jacketed hero Tim—say, if you mis-time a jump onto the head of a deadly Goomba—you can reverse time, for example, and try again. Or sit back for a moment, and examine the way the world operates for clues, as if you were looking at clockwork. ///

/// Don't let the lovely graphics—backgrounds shimmer and pulse as if the entire world was taking deep, slow breaths—or the wistful and melancholic music fool you. *Braid*'s puzzles are multilayered, tough, and very easy to over-think. Intuition can help as much as experimentation. ///

> *Braid*'s puzzles are multilayered, tough, and very easy to over-think. Intuition can help as much as experimentation.

/// You'll notice that some objects are immune to your manipulations of the flow of time. And those fortunate circumstances might help you gather jigsaw pieces scattered over the six worlds you'll explore. ///

/// You can actually get through most of the game without gathering any of these jigsaw pieces or solving any of *Braid*'s puzzles, just like you can get through most of real life without reaching for anything. But what would be the point of that? ///



/// Each world gives you a unique way to manipulate time. In one, your movements left and right move time backward and forward. In another, a bubble slows time down the closer you get to it. You can even rewind time and co-operate with a duplicate of yourself doing what you did seconds ago. ///

/// In order to reach for something, you have to explore a world that can be tricky and sometimes dangerous. Isn't there a way, Tim wonders, to be able to learn from your mistakes, and at the same time undo the damage they have caused? There is, but things never turn out quite the way you expect. ///

/// Tim made a mistake once. It was a doozy. As a result, he lost the Princess he loved, now in the clutches of a horrible evil. Tim wants to go back and make everything right. But that's not what *Braid* is really about? You know what *Braid* is really about? ///

VITALS **DEVELOPER:** NUMBER NONE **PUBLISHER:** NUMBER NONE **RELEASE:** MARCH 2009 **URL:** WWW.BRAID-GAME.COM

+++ WWW.PCGAMER.COM +++

OPERATION FLASHPOINT
Dragon Rising

SPOILER: CONTAINS NO ACTUAL DRAGONS

"It's almost like the first game hated you," admits Clive Lindop, Senior Game Designer on *Operation Flashpoint: Dragon Rising*. (This is a man who used to run a fansite for the original game.) His comment points to the direction that Codemasters is taking with the sequel: where the original was expansive, unflinchingly realistic, and consequently unforgiving, *Dragon Rising* is aiming for a more polished, welcoming experience.

This doesn't mean expansiveness has been sacrificed. *Dragon Rising* takes place on a 220 square-kilometer chunk of land called Skira Island. Based on satellite data of a real island called Kiska, Codemasters has tweaked its terrain to allow for the kind of war they want, and repositioned it between Russia and Japan in service of their plot. Skira is rich in oil and being invaded by the People's Liberation Army of China, causing Russia to request Western assistance. That's your cue—the U.S. sends in Marines, and you're a leader of a four-man squad in the deployed battalion.

"Everything in *Operation Flashpoint* is presented from a military point of view," Lindop explains. "It's not about being a buddy movie and learning to care about your squadmates. You're professional soldiers. You've probably fought in Iraq and Afghanistan already. You know your business. There's no Vietnam-style banter. When you watch TV shows like *Generation Kill* [HBO miniseries about soldiers fighting in Iraq], you see that they're very businesslike. They have to remain calm and focused to communicate and get things done."

/// Squad AI will object if you issue rash commands, like ordering a Jeep to make a Taco Bell run through an artillery zone. ///

THE CAMPAIGN IS SPLIT up into three days of steady fighting, each day beginning with a briefing on the overall progress of the war. The four or so missions you'll carry out each day are communicated via radio and detailed on your map, but while you're not going to be pulled out for grand cutscenes to relate the plot, this isn't a sprawling open world in the *Far Cry 2* sense.

We inserted a short distance from our objective in the example mission we played, with the goal of wiping out Chinese forces occupying a small village nestled in a valley. You can carry out the assault either by using a context-sensitive command radial to issue movement or formation commands to your squad on the fly, or more carefully via a satellite map of the island. The radial's nested commands felt a little awkward in the alpha build we played, but let us order a flank across the valley, lay down suppressing fire by spotting through our binoculars, march in a line formation, or tell our team to hop inside a vehicle and speed down the hill, Dukes of Hazard style.

Although missions will time out (if you don't complete your goal by, say, 6 p.m.), there aren't artificial boundaries preventing you from wandering off. This sometimes lets you acquire new tools for the job; not far from our insertion point, we recovered a Jeep with a mounted MG. Other times, you'll spot or join other skirmishes-in-progress on the island. It's a way of contextualizing combat: Codemasters says they've plotted out an entire war around the missions you'll personally undertake. Go traveling and you might bump in to retreating convoys, bombing helicopters, or patrolling tanks.

OUR OWN ATTEMPTS TO assault the village, meanwhile, resulted in the squad getting shot up, losing faith in our ability to lead, and abandoning our initial "run straight at them, fire wildly" plan of attack. Your soldiers do their best to follow your orders, but if your ideas are stupid or lead them into Purple Heart territory, these guys are smart enough to hold their position. And if the computer squadmates aren't cutting it, you can take advantage of the drop-in co-operative play.

The concessions made in favor of accessibility that we were shown seemed small: having every squad member be able to revive wounded teammates or repair damaged vehicles, say, rather than relying on keeping a specific class alive. But while ballistics and physics are still carefully and accurately modeled and we were told that a single shot can kill, the build we were playing had invincibility turned on. Codemasters isn't trying to turn *Op Flash* into *Call of Duty 4*, but it's still unclear whether it's possible to appeal to both a mass audience and those that loved the original at the same time. /// GRAHAM SMITH ///

/// Co-op mode will be the online focus, more so than versus play. ///

Why should we play *Flashpoint 2* instead of *ArmA 2*?

We asked Senior Game Designer Clive Lindop this directly. His response? Even if the original *Op Flash* dev is on *ArmA 2*, they aren't the same games, and that he expects *Flashpoint 2* to be more experiential, adrenaline-pumping, and based in the actual experiences of the infantryman over being a strict sim.

TARGET REALITY

COMPARING CODEMASTERS' VISUAL AMBITION TO WHAT THEY'VE ACHIEVED

Early on, Codemasters produced images and videos to illustrate their game's intended look. Clive Lindop: "It's like how an artist does a sketch. You don't just grab a paintbrush and your oils and go straight to the canvas...You do target renders. They allow you to visualize what you want...You to have something to match the real game to and ask: 'How close are we to this?' It's very much a developer's way of planting a big flag in the ground and saying, 'We're going to do this.'"

VITALS **DEVELOPER:** CODEMASTERS **PUBLISHER:** CODEMASTERS **RELEASE:** JUNE **URL:** WWW.FLASHPOINTGAME.COM

A WRITER IN EVERY BOX

VITALS

NAME: Michael Austin

TITLE: CTO, Hidden Path Entertainment

RECENTLY RELEASED: *Defense Grid* (Lead Design)

FAVORITE ALGORITHM: Fourier Transform

FAVORITE CLASS: Druid

DEFENSE GRID LEAD DESIGNER, MICHAEL AUSTIN, MUSES ON THE VALUE OF SELF-CREATED STORIES IN GAMES

Back in college, I ran a MUD with some of my friends. It was a fantasy world unofficially based off of Robert Jordan's "Wheel of Time" series, and we had a pretty loyal base of several hundred players. When a player reached the top level, we'd create a very difficult custom quest for them to go on with a lot of ceremony on their return—players would line the main thoroughfare cheering, and we'd arrive to personally transform them into their new role in the next tier of the game. It was such a powerful experience that players were still recounting it years later, long after they had moved on.

Creating a compelling and interactive world where a wide range of stories can take place is difficult. There's been a long-standing debate in the game industry about the role of writers in games. Ideally, we'd ship a writer in every box, someone able to improvise responses and situations based on the choices of the player. More often, the fallback is a linear set of blocks that railroad a player through a story written like a movie script.

MODERN GAMES ATTEMPT to create AI writers, but humans are great at pattern recognition. We recognize mad-lib quests and situations, and get frustrated when we think the computer is cheating to create drama. A computer can create infinite variations of "Go to the mountain to the south and collect three bird feathers," but once a player has experienced all of the patterns, there will be no surprises.

As game developers, it's expensive and counterproductive to scale content to account for every decision we think a player is likely to make. New approaches like *Left 4 Dead*'s AI director, where the AI adjusts the pace instead of the writing, are interesting, and with multiplayer games like *World of Warcraft* and *Counter-Strike*, there is novelty in other players.

Whenever someone tells me their favorite moment in a game, it always is something like:

"The CTs had all been killed except for me. I was guarding the bomb site, and hoping that I'd have a chance to take out a few of them before they killed me. I saw a grenade bounce into range, and before I turned my vision went white. I just started spraying bullets everywhere. And when I could see again, I saw three of them dead outside the entrance to the tunnel."

Or: "We were in Dire Maul, and our tank died. The ogre king went straight for the healer, taking him out in one hit, then finished off the rogue a moment later. We were sure it was a wipe. I started shooting as fast as I can, then laid down a frost trap and ran in circles. He was on me before I knew it, and right when I thought I was about to die, he missed me—my last shot killed him, leaving me with a sliver of health. It was awesome."

The developer provides the world, but the player provides the real story.

The game development process is changing. We're building tools that can create more complex content than ever before. Today we can take a handful of template faces and turn them into a hundred thousand variations by exposing sliders to blend between them to a player. Tomorrow I may be able to create new quests from other quests, or create new characters and AI based on rules and templates. Not only will the stories be personal, but the content itself will be more personal.

ILLUSTRATION BY ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/RUSSELLTATEDOTCOM (WRITER) AND FILO (BOX)

WARHAMMER: What Now?

BORED RAIDING THE SAME OLD DUNGEONS? MEET THE NEW CAREERS THAT WILL BRING YOU BACK TO WARHAMMER ONLINE

Nothing says Warhammer like a half-naked Dwarf wildly clashing axes with a wantonly vicious Ork that just loves to smash things. And while there's been plenty of Ork-on-Dwarf violence in *Warhammer Online* up to now, nothing has been as furious as what we expect to see from the Dwarf Slayer and Ork Choppa—two new careers being introduced in "Call to Arms," *WAR*'s first live expansion. After some exclusive hands-on time with the new careers, we chatted up Producer Adam Gershowitz, who provided extra insight into the two careers along with the new "berserk meter" combat system they introduce. /// JOSH AUGUSTINE ///

Separated at Birth?

Despite their difference, these two new classes have a lot in common:

The purest of pure melee DPS classes, the Choppa and Slayer may be lacking utility but they'll reward anyone reckless enough to unleash their full damage potential.

They are near-mirrors of each other with 60–70 percent equivalent abilities.

Newbies welcome! The combat mechanics aren't very complex, designed to be accessible to first-time players.

Be sure to train up your apothecary crafting skill—if anyone would need healing potions, it'd be a Slayer or a Choppa.

Slayers wear significantly less armor than your average Dwarf, but all the gear slots are available and they're even classified as medium armor due to their extreme hardiness.

DWARF SLAYER Last Chance at Redemption

"Dwarves are very grumpy, dour old men, but like all old men they stick close to their friends and their word is their bond. Whenever a Dwarf feels shamed because he wasn't able to fulfill an oath, they take the Slayer's oath, which basically says the only way I can make up for my deficiencies at being a Dwarf is to die gloriously in combat. They shave their heads, spike their hair up in a traditional orange mohawk, and forgo shields or armor, only keeping their weapons and adornment, like jewelry. Slayers can only be male. We joke about having female Slayers, but a topless Dwarf wouldn't really be in line with our rating." *–Adam Gershowitz*

ORC CHOPPA Happy to Be Hacking

"The Ork Choppa is the epitome of simplicity. Orks love to hit things. They fight with themselves, they fight with other people…they get in fights all the time. While Black Orks are more controlled, leading the battle and keeping Da Boys in line, a Choppa can kind of get lost in a battle, not because he's angry, not because he's trying to redeem himself—he just finds it really fun, it's what he enjoys. They love bashing heads, it's a treat. It's like guys who like to play rugby; that's what Choppas are all about." *–AG*

Let's Go Crazy! Adam Gershowitz explains the Berserk Meter

"Think of an RPM meter on a car: There's a green section, a yellow section, and a redline section. The minute a Slayer or Choppa gets into a fight, the meter starts moving very rapidly. The higher the meter goes the more damage you do, and when you hit the red line, the more damage you take. At the yellow section of the meter, the Choppa or Slayer still has control over his rage and can use execution abilities to reset their Berserk Meter, releasing all their pent up anger in one thunderous blow. These players are going to be like racecar drivers that are shifting gears constantly. The other type of player will redline their character as fast as possible and flail about wildly, either laughing it off when they get face-planted or rely on a tank or healer to keep their frenzied attack going. The berserk mode is like Leeroy Jenkins: 'Uh, where'd he go? Ah, son of a bitch, get a healer on him! Go, go, go!'"

ILLUSTRATION BY JOSH AUGUSTINE

Which Path Is Right for You?

The cost and benefits of each Mastery Line for the new careers

"BIG HIT" LINE
Giant-Slayer (Dwarf)
Da Hitta (Ork)
Constantly exhaust your rage in big hits on a single target using a great weapon for spiky damage (great for RvR).

"AOE" LINE
Dragon-Slayer (Dwarf)
Da Wrecka (Ork)
Keep your berserk meter maxed and swing two axes like crazy to deal damage indiscrimately around you.

"MIXER" LINE
Troll-Slayer (Dwarf)
Da Savage (Ork)
For the strategist who wants the freedom to switch between aoe and spike damage as the situation warrants.

The MMO Times-Picayune

Misery Loves Company

When the largest player alliance in *EVE Online* was betrayed from within, a record 48,065 players logged on to watch it burn. Rival alliance Goon-Swarm claimed responsibility for the dissolution that plunged Band of Brothers' former territories into chaos as stunned members fell victim to pirates and looters.

10 Our Blizzards, 5 Hail Warcrafts

University of Colorado student Theo Zijderveld ruffled a few feathers when he called *World of Warcraft* the newest religion in his thesis, arguing that it meets a sociologist's definition by providing culture, community, ethics, and emotion.

You Won't See *GW2* Anytime Soon

After rumors that *Guild Wars 2* was delayed to 2011 circled the interwebs, NCSoft insisted they had never set a release date for the game and are taking a Blizzard-esque "it's done when it's done" approach to its release. If that translates to a polished game at launch, it can only be a good thing.

u r hit by ez enemy, want 2 attack?

Who says pesky necessities like eating and driving need to interrupt your grinding session? The first MMO with robust cell-phone integration, *Fantasia*, has entered closed beta in Korea, and *The Agency* promises to bring similar integration to the Western market later this year.

Changes a'Brewin

Patch 3.1, *WoW*'s first major content update since the *Wrath of the Lich King* expansion, brings sweeping class changes, dual talent specs, the PvP Arena's 6th season, and new raid dungeon Ulduar.

Quote of the Month

"I don't think [online multiplayer games] get impacted at all, because people who play them are addicts. Losing their jobs makes them more likely to play because they have more time to play."

—Wedbush-Morgan financial analyst Michael Pachter describes why he thinks MMOs are recession-proof

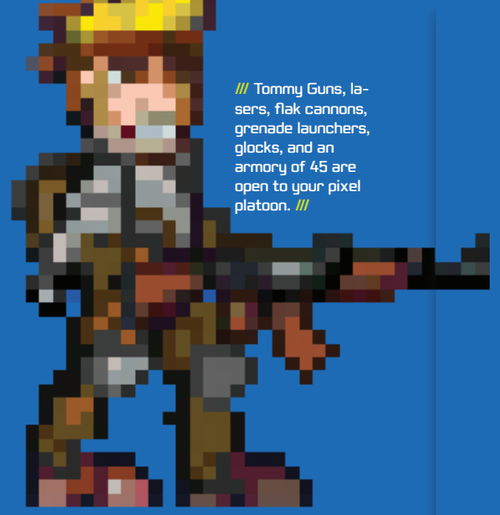
CORTEX COMMAND

Yes, I would like to shoot a rocket launcher at zombies. Yes, I would appreciate the opportunity to jetpack-boost generously into the air and casually wire a missile into a pack of pixilated undead, kicking their guts and limbs every which way.

Any right-minded gamer would swear this oath—we love (killing) zombies, we love shoulder-mounted things that go boom, we love convenient backpacks that make us hover. *Cortex Command* carries all three, and it's part of the reason we've had our eye on the 2D title since early last year, coveting it as a colorful project imbued by retro spirit, but rendered with modern tech. In your hands, it's *Metal Slug* or real-time *Worms* with PC values—strap jetpacks to tiny, pixilated robots and soldiers, strip out the side-scrolling linearity for fully navigable environments, render it with a fully dynamic physics system and detailed 16-bit era art, throw in an arsenal of AKs, grenade shooters, lasers, pistols, and bombs to shoot at zombies and robodrones, make it mod-able, and you've got something that perfectly suits the PC.

The catch? It's incomplete: a game-in-progress that indie dev Data Realms continues to upgrade. The current version sports three campaign missions, a skirmish mode, split-screen four-player multiplayer, and a few editing tools. But the slim content can't deter us. *CC*'s 2D physics engine is really something to behold: Kicking up dirt and destroying terrain lends itself to reckless sandboxy sessions, like calling in tripod machine gun robots from your menu and watching their metal skin dent and flake away from the AK your AI enemy's firing off. Then, maybe you'd use your delivery vehicle (a hovering shuttle) as a kamikaze to crush them, and leave a smoking crater (shaped based on your angle and velocity) behind.

/// Story, the way it's meant to be: a classic setup for classic old-school action. ///



/// Tommy Guns, lasers, flak cannons, grenade launchers, glocks, and an armory of 45 are open to your pixel platoon. ///

The engine makes simple gameplay actions (flicking gatling gun fire or a sniper rifle round into a pack of enemies) dramatically displayed (lopped off limbs, dynamic debris with full collision detection, or a mound of robot junk left behind). Every patch of pixels can be molded and deformed, and it's this environmental destructibility that gets us off, along with the charming chiptune soundtrack, which evokes early '90s game music at its finest. "Some of the best aspects of the games from a decade or two ago came about due to technical limitations," says Daniel Tabar, development director at Data Realms. "There's no reason to abandon such things as good 2D gameplay/art and strong melodies just because the technology now allows us to do fancy 3D and orchestral soundtracks."

/// Aside from explodey physics, the subterranean cross-sections are one of our favorite visual elements in *Cortex*. ///

ALL *CORTEX* NEEDS now is more campaign content to put the pretty tech to work. The next major update to the game should solve that, says Tabar, who's planning to add to *Cortex* a turn-based, strategic metagame similar to *Syndicate*. "You start out as a boss of a mining exploration company who has come to this new Earth-like planet on a large ship (a 'TradeStar') along with many other entrepreneurs and adventurers. The TradeStar stays in orbit around the planet, acting as a safe haven and marketplace for all ventures down to the surface. Your first task in the campaign will be to establish mining bases that will generate income. Continually upgrading and managing your bases will be critical, as they're your main source of cash flow. When an attack happens, you can choose to actively try to defend it yourself, where you take the reins on the ground and it turns into a defense mission—or you can choose to let your governor brain that has been posted down there do it automatically. If you or your governor fail to defend the base, it and all you've invested in it is lost!"

> "Some of the best aspects of the games from a decade or two ago came about due to technical limitations."
>
> –DANIEL TABAR, DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR, DATA REALMS

Even if it's currently a shell of characters, weapons, and environments, *CC* is a toy that we're hoping blossoms into a gem of retro charm and strategery. In the meanwhile, *Cortex*'s community contributions are good stand-ins: We downloaded a flying Kool-Aid Man model to spar with our Space Marine skins, then grabbed some weapon sets modeled after *Crusader: No Remorse* and a nuclear bomb mod. And through all the action overhead, our brain sat comfortably in an underground bunker, wading in a gel-filled fishbowl. /// EVAN LAHTI ///

PLAY IT

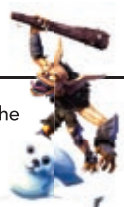
A demo version of *Cortex Command* is available on this month's *PC Gamer* disc. You can also download the trial at datarealms.com, or purchase a registration key for $18.

+++ WWW.PCGAMER.COM +++

OVERLORD II

MEET THE NEW BOSS...

Same as the old boss? Not quite, but not so far off either. Although Codemasters was quick to assure us that *Overlord II* is a true sequel, our sneak-peek demo revealed the game to be a series of modest yet intriguing enhancements to the original formula. But that's just fine with us, because we dug the goofy, good-natured evil that characterized the original, and knowing that writer Rhianna Pratchett will once again be handling the game's story has heightened our hankering to dominate this rollicking fantasy world. /// GARY STEINMAN ///



TRUE FACE OF EVIL

Disappointed with the softer side of the first *Overlord*? We're promised that evil will be much more of a reality in this sequel, with your only options being domination or destruction. (When Codemasters saw the doubt in our eyes, they immediately showed us a minion gleefully clubbing a baby seal. Evil indeed.) You also can get up to three mistresses this time around.

PLAYING WITH POWER

Last time, the Overlord himself was a bit of a buffoon: none too strong, with a dopey walk that made us wonder if he was due for a diaper change. This time, you play the role of a more powerful, more imposing, and more agile Overlord.

LAYING SIEGE

Capture a siege engine and use it to decimate an opposing army. It's all part of the goal to offer even larger, more epic battles than before.

BOY WONDER

The game starts when you're about this high, a wee Overlad who has yet to learn about his true powers and role in this world. All you know is that you're different, and the townfolk don't like you for it. You'll find out soon enough that you're part of a long line of Overlords, and that you'll have the fight of your life against the Glorious Empire, which is doing its darndest to eliminate all magic from the world.

MEET THE MINIONS

The Overlord might be in charge, but the real stars are the Minions that you summon with a wave of your arm. The four primary types are unchanged—browns are your basic fighters, reds are your fireball-wielding archer-types, greens are your stealth assassins, and blues are your healers—but they've been significantly improved...

MOUNTED MAYHEM

Spot a pack of wild wolves over yonder? Sweep your browns toward them, and they'll mount up. Your wolveriders can then jump gaps and crash through armored foes like cavalry. Other Minions can hop atop critters too: Reds ride on fire salamanders, effectively turning them into mobile turrets, and greens grab onto spiders, giving them a web attack and the ability to scale walls.

SERVANTS FOR LIFE ...AND BEYOND...

Find yourself growing attached to a certain Minion? This time around, each member of your horde will have a unique name, and when that personal favorite inevitably dies in your service, you can now sacrifice lesser Minions to resurrect him—with all his special equipment intact. While you're at it, you can also sacrifice any Minion on the fly for a vitality boost (no more need to root around for those sacrificial pits).

JOIN THE HORDE

Possess a Minion and lead your horde through Minion-only missions. Attack from the front lines as a brown, or lead a stealth squad as a green. When you're not a Minion, you'll be happy to know that Codemasters is working on improved Minion pathfinding, so you'll no longer have to double back to retrieve an errant critter stuck behind some bush.

VITALS **DEVELOPER:** TRIUMPH STUDIOS **PUBLISHER:** CODEMASTERS **RELEASE:** JUNE **URL:** WWW.CODEMASTERS.COM

EARLY EXIT

WITH THE HEAD OF GAMES FOR WINDOWS LIVE RECENTLY LOPPED OFF, WHITHER MICROSOFT'S ONLINE SERVICE?

Back in January, Microsoft announced the first layoffs in company history. One name stood out on the list of the recently unemployed: **Chris Early,** formerly General Manager of Windows Gaming Technology. We got Early on the phone to discuss his efforts on the Games for Windows Live (GFWL) project and to share his insight on Microsoft's true level of support for PC gaming. /// DAN STAPLETON ///

PC GAMER: When you took over as head of GFWL in 2007, what were your objectives? What did you want to see the program achieve?
CHRIS EARLY: When I moved over to GFWL (that's the key difference to understand—when people talk about Games for Windows often it's the branding program, and my focus was on GFWL), the key first objective was essentially to move the business of Xbox Live onto the PC platform. Personally, I think there's a huge market opportunity for a PC gaming service that services both the publisher and developer, and the player. Now, as you probably remember, we had a bit of a stuttering start with GFWL and by the time we came out with our midpoint and then our fall release last year, we'd made significant improvements and the system was significantly better as well.

Did you get the impression that Microsoft really wanted you to succeed? Did they give you the support and resources you thought you'd need to make it happen?
In all fairness, I don't think that anyone at Microsoft ever gets all the resources they need. When J [Allard] was making the Xbox, the very first time around, which was the darling of the division, he didn't have enough resources. Did we have enough to make a difference? I think that when you look at the success of the product with the titles we were able to attract for this last holiday season, we were definitely on the right track. There's no question that we were the Windows team in the Xbox division, and as such we accomplished a lot for a relatively small tight-knit team.

What did you think of the reception of GFW and GFWL by the press and the gaming community, and did Microsoft take the feedback well?
Well, answering the last part first, I'd like to think so. At some level, the folks who built the product probably knew as much or better exactly what the press and the players were feeling because we're all PC gamers at heart. And so we felt the same frustration when we weren't able to release all the features that we wanted to, or even if you look back

/// GFWL launched a redesigned look in November, but added no new features. ///

> "We felt the same frustration when we weren't able to release all the features that we wanted to."

at initially charging $50 a year for it like Xbox Live, and realizing then and now that that probably was not something that helped us grow early on. Being able to correct that was a strong win.

Based on the lack of Microsoft-developed or even published PC games over the past year or two, it feels to us like Microsoft has abandoned PC gaming, despite their protestations that they'll continue to treat the PC as "a top-tier gaming platform." Was Microsoft's treatment of PC gaming consistent with how you'd expect them to treat a top-tier gaming platform?
I think that the question there has to revolve around how Microsoft versus the rest of the world defines that. I clearly can't speak for Microsoft anymore, but my experience while I was there was that to them it meant that they made the operating system into a great gaming platform. And there was a lot of work that was done and continues to be done on the Windows platform to support gaming. What they didn't do, which is what everybody sees, is go to the Microsoft Gaming Studios and make PC versions of some of their games.

Do you think that that message is being effectively conveyed to the PC gaming public?
Well, somewhere along the line there certainly is a perception problem, because there's a strong push in the Windows division overall to recognize gaming as a differentiating factor for the OS. You probably know as well as I do that Windows is a significant piece of Microsoft's revenue, and to lose gaming as a differentiator is not something that Microsoft wants.

Did Microsoft ever approach Valve about teaming up to make Steam the official Games for Windows platform?
I don't know that it's appropriate for me to comment about, but in general Microsoft does work well with Steam. In fact, there are a number of GFWL titles that are distributed on the Steam platform, and I know that there are some titles that are adopting some Steam features coming forward that have necessitated Steam and GFWL work together and make sure they're not stepping on each other from an update process or DRM or things like that.

The main problem that has arisen from mixing the two is people having to log into two different services to play their games. It feels like an extra hoop to jump through.
In an ideal world, would you have to do that? Hopefully not. But the reality of it is that both Valve and the GFWL team have PC gaming at their forefront, and in their hearts I think that's why there's so much cooperation between those two teams, because when you take that step back it doesn't become a turf war of "Oh, we're not going to support you because you're supporting a competitor's service," or anything like that; it's more about making sure that PC gaming stays strong.

BETTER OFF DEAD?

Reviews Editor Dan Stapleton rips Microsoft a new one over its neglect of PC gamers and GFWL

Despite the efforts of Mr. Early and his team, in its current form the GFWL service is miles behind the competition, and the gap is only getting wider. Services like Steam and XFire both do a better job of connecting PC gamers to each other, even if they don't connect us to Xbox players (no big loss, considering that only three of the 15 GFWL titles allow cross-platform play), and offer more and better features. A half-assed approach can't keep up with Valve's full-assed efforts. Relegating the entire Windows gaming program to a small team within the Xbox division is simply not enough. We aren't asking for the moon—but two years in, there still isn't a desktop application to let us see if our friends are online. That's not good enough.

Microsoft needs to make up its mind: Either dedicate the resources necessary to make GFWL a real player in online PC gaming, or get out of the way and stop saddling great games like *Fallout 3* with annoyances like the terrible GFW Marketplace when they could be using the more convenient Steam or Impulse services instead. (No, we don't want to have to pay for 1,000 "Microsoft points" to buy an 800-point piece of DLC. That's a ripoff.)

THE 15 LIVES OF GFW LIVE

Since launching in 2007 with *Halo 2*, Games for Windows Live has been used in 15 PC titles. How many do *you* own?

2007

2008

PCG REPLAYS THE GREAT GAMES OF OLD

PAINKILLER

LOTS OF MEAT, LITTLE ELSE, IN THIS UNAPOLOGETICALLY ARCADEY SHOOTER

/// Beware of low-flying gibs. ///

INITIAL IMPRESSIONS

LOGAN I don't even know where to start with this one. Seriously. The stake gun. The four-story boss fight. "Monster juggling." The thing about *Painkiller* is that it was pure *game*. Yeah, it had a story: dead wife, war between heaven and hell, assassinating Lucifer's generals. Whatever. It was really just about taking everything that's fun about shooting things to pieces and cramming it all into a single game. And that's why you can have levels that include ancient monasteries, orphanages, modern military bases, and even a swamp, and yet it all feels cohesive and *right*, because everything in the game is about shooting swarms of enemies with very extreme prejudice.

RELEASED: APRIL 2004
DEVELOPER: PEOPLE CAN FLY
PUBLISHER: DREAMCATCHER
PC GAMER FINAL VERDICT: 84% (JULY 2004)
WHAT WE SAID THEN: "A QUIRKY, HELLISHLY FUN SHOOTER."

DAN Don't sell the story short—based on the opening cinematic, I'm pretty sure that the moral is that you should never make deep, loving eye-contact with your significant other, or you'll end up in a hell-dimension. That's sound advice.

EVAN I echo the arcade feel; so much so that I wish the main character was dropping catchphrases between kills like Duke Nukem, even though he doesn't fit that stereotype. There isn't a lot of level design happening here (barrels!), but it's not really about that—just gunning down everyone that God doesn't like. I hate to say it, but I wish it had more gore.

GARY Catchphrases? *More* gore? What the heck is wrong with you? I missed *Painkiller* when it first came out, and what impressed me most is the game's utter commitment to being a pure shooter. The action is fast and the twitching is furious. So what if there aren't any intellectual challenges or character development? I couldn't stop blasting away—and it was all the better knowing I was fighting for *God*.

TROUBLE IN PURGATORY

JOSH I'm impressed with the monster design. They're similar enough to fit in one theme (you know, the crazy Hell demon theme), but diverse enough to keep you interested in tearing up another several hundred of them. The bosses have been pretty anti-climactic so far, though; I didn't even realize I had killed the first boss because I had entered rage mode and one-shotted him. I was pleasantly surprised to see that the third boss (in the caverns) required some much-needed strategy. I don't even know how many times I jumped back and forth across the fire pit emptying all my ammo at the boss before I noticed the pentagram on the ceiling. It was a simple mechanic to bring in light and lure the boss into it, but it was a welcome change of pace from the run-n-gun gameplay.

DAN That boss "puzzle" was a travesty! Whenever *Painkiller* deviates from its great run-and-gun formula it shoots itself in the foot with a stake gun. Most of us got stuck there (including you, Josh, I happen to know), and had to Google for the solution because up until that point in the game there was absolutely *no reason to look up.* The room was littered with things that *looked* like they should be shot or used to kill the boss in some way, but weren't. And even if you *did* look up, the thing you're supposed to shoot is darkly colored and subtle, and doesn't exactly scream "shoot me." There are several other instances where the level design fails to tell you what you were supposed to shoot, which can be a total buzzkill—and the one thing in *Painkiller* that should *not* be killed is the buzz.

> "What impressed me the most is the game's utter commitment to being a pure shooter."

LOGAN I loved the bosses. Loved 'em. If they made dolls of the bosses, I'd take them to bed with me and cuddle. And that occasional puzzle element in the boss fights…I'm pretty sure the developer was just screwing with us. They knew that once you buzz-saw your way through a level, you get confident and arrogant, so they threw a curveball just for laughs. The result isn't really the height of entertainment, but I imagine they laughed their asses off watching people struggle a bit.

EVAN The level design is kludgey as hell in some spots—the glowing red runes you have to walk over to enter a new area (and trigger the script that piles more enemies into a room) aren't the most brilliant design. Also, sometimes you find yourself in a massive acre-sized room or mile-long icy bridge populated with just a half-dozen enemies. It seems wasteful, but it lets me do what I've always wanted: strafe some ninjas at insane range while bunnyhopping, and arcing a single stake into one of their eye sockets to watch them cartwheel into the ground, impaled vampire-style.

SAVE 10% ON PAINKILLER
Join the fun by buying *Painkiller* from our friends at GoG.com before April 30, and you can save a buck! Enter the code "PCG1" at checkout to score your DRM-free copy for just $8.99!

TICKET TO PARADISE?

LOGAN *Painkiller* doesn't feel dated to me at all. The environments are so stylized and fantastic that I never think…well, like I did when I fired up the Tokyo level in *Soldier of Fortune*, which I had remembered as being spectacular, but by today's standards looks like crap.

GARY I couldn't agree more. *Painkiller* proves that style goes a lot further than substance, and that lack of ambition goes a long way toward keeping a game from feeling dated. The purity of the gameplay helps it stand out from all the highfalutin hybrid adventure/shooters out right now, and the goofy yet gory hordes of baddies amuse me thoroughly.

DAN It has definitely aged well, and can be enjoyed today as much as the day it came out. But while it's certainly a good time, it lacks the depth that I usually look for in a game that I'll play more than once. I can sum up *Painkiller* in three simple steps: 1) Shoot everything that moves until it stops moving. 2) Follow the compass until you see more moving things. 3) Return to step 1. Having spent some good hours with it I'm ready to move on to something else and not look back…for a while at least.

EVAN Good weapons don't age, they ferment. *Painkiller*'s philosophy seems to be that duct-taping two dissimilar but devastating pieces of afterlife ordnance together produces the best results, and it's a thesis I endorse. It's rare that I grow tired of shooting shurikens, but when I do, my right-click is an inch away, ready to connect an arc of blue electricity to my enemies. I can imagine a TV shopping network host selling up the convenience of a flamethrower/assault rifle or rocket launcher/minigun ("It slices! It ventilates! It breaks crates with extreme prejudice!") and it's really that ability to rain 12 different kinds of death upon your everyday samurai from hell, or flaming-skulled warlock, that earns my appreciation.

GAME ADS GET SILLY

EXPECTING A CHILD? WANT FREE GAMES? READ ON...

"Wanting people to listen, you can't just tap them on the shoulder anymore. You have to hit them with a sledgehammer, and then you'll notice you've got their strict attention." Good old Kevin Spacey, toward the end of *Se7en*. Nowadays, instead of a serial killer he'd be a marketing man for a games company.

F.E.A.R. 2 CATS

With Friday the 13th close to *F.E.A.R. 2*'s launch, Warner Bros. decided to take advantage. It draped lovely, cute, probably terrified cats in *F.E.A.R. 2* jackets and walked them around London. Anyone seeing the cat then instantly bought a copy of *F.E.A.R. 2*. That, friends, is the power of advertising.

THQ'S CRUSH A CAR

THQ decided that the best way to get your attention focused on *Warhammer 40K: Dawn of War II* was to build a full-scale APC from the game, customizing a real-world tank to resemble the Rhino. It then decided that destroying a car would be fun. We can't disagree, as the video we're about to link to is clearly the best thing not in this mag: **snipurl.com/c1peq.**

CODIES CALL FOR JASONS

If you don't have a better half willing to name a child "Jason" in order to win a year's supply of Codemasters' games, then we'd suggest you start preparing separation documents. Codies, to promote *Rise of the Argonauts*, asked people to do just that. You can find the details here: **www.bringbackjason.com.**

DUKE NUKEM PRESENTS:

"Yeah, but what about this OTHER game that's taking its sweet time?!"

Hey, *Guild Wars 2*, when are you going to get off your fat, lazy ass and come out already?

release meter 0509

WHAT YOU'LL BE PLAYING

Dear Electronic Arts,
I feel like you're sending me mixed signals. When you pushed back the release dates for *Dragon Age: Origins*, *The Godfather II*, and *Sims 3*, I was afraid you might be just a tease. But then, out of nowhere, you offered a beautiful bite-sized *Battlefield* game for Q2. So I just need to know where we stand. Check one box and pass the note back.

Do you like me?

■ Yes ■ No

Q2 2009

Champions Online	2K
Arma II	505 Games
X-Men Origins: Wolverine	Activision
Ghostbusters: The Video Game	Atari
Bionic Commando	Capcom
Dark Void	Capcom
Street Fighter IV	Capcom
FUEL	Codemasters
Ride to Hell	Deep Silver
Battlefield Heroes	EA
Battlefield: 1943	EA
The Sims 3	EA
Divinity 2	Ego Draconis
Batman: Arkham Asylum	Eidos
Battlestations: Pacific	Eidos
Blood Bowl	Focus Home Interactive
Cities XL	Monte Cristo
Two Worlds: The Temptation	SouthPeak
Company of Heroes: Tales of Valor	THQ
Anno 1404	Ubisoft
Demigod	Stardock

Q3 2009

Borderlands	2K
Machinarium	Amanita Design
Starcraft II: Wings of Liberty	Blizzard
Jumpgate Evolution	Codemasters
Dragon Age: Origins	EA
Section 8	SouthPeak
Prototype	Sierra
Edge of Twilight	SouthPeak
Hearts of Iron III	Paradox
CrimeCraft	Vogster

Q4 2009

BioShock 2: Sea of Dreams	2K
Mafia II	2K
Global Agenda	Hi-Rez
Aliens: Colonial Marines	Sega
Metro 2033	THQ

BATTLEFIELD IS BACK!

THE PC'S FAVORITE SHOOTER RETURNS—THRICE

What is the future of PC gaming? When developers are becoming more and more risk averse, while our own expectations are only rising, the future is important. How will we buy games? How will we be sold games? How are our tastes changing? These questions matter, because if a developer gets it wrong, they'll go under.

This is the situation the *Battlefield* team face. How do they produce a game we'll love, and play, with as little risk as possible? They've come up with three answers.

The first is *Battlefield 1943*: a high-tech but limited update to the game that launched DICE's best series: *Battlefield 1942*. And it's going to cost far less than a standard game.

The second is *Battlefield Heroes*: a free-to-play cartoon shooter that takes the silliness of multi-vehicular warfare, and adds addictive leveling and customization. The risk here is astonishing: The team clearly states that to be a success, *Heroes* will have to be the most popular *Battlefield* game they have ever created.

The final roll of the dice is *Battlefield: Bad Company 2*. PC gamers didn't get to play the first version of this single- and multiplayer shooter. That mistake is being remedied.

This isn't all. In a recent conversation, *PC Gamer* asked producer Patrick Liu if *Battlefield 3* was still being made. He admitted: "[DICE executive producer] Ben Cousins did say we were working on five *Battlefield* titles. You do the math."

/// You, sir, have just angered a tank. Say "goodbye" to your testicles. ///

/// The new engine makes explosions pretty enough to marry. ///

THE PITCH
Fun, frantic shooter. Old school, but in an engine pleasing enough for modern, newer audiences.

BATTLEFIELD 1943

RELOADING THE FPS LEGEND

For PC gamers of a certain age, *Battlefield 1942*'s Wake Island map is *the* map. That oddly shaped hunk of rock in the Pacific has been home to battles ever since it was released as the *1942* demo. Six years later, people are still throwing fighter planes, submarines, tanks, jeeps, and soft human bodies at each other.

So the decision to make *BF 1943* an homage to that earlier classic seems entirely justified. Bring it back, shine it up. Wake Island will be one of three maps that make up *1943*'s re-imagining of the classic series, Guadalcanal and Iwo Jima being the other two theaters for the 24-person multiplayer matches the game will host. Three maps is not a lot, but *1943* isn't meant to be a traditional big release. It represents an experiment in frugal coding for a team most known for fun but bloated games held together by humongous patches and witchcraft. This time, they've crammed the maps and a new, physics-heavy multiplayer engine into just 350MB, and the results are definitely fun.

The format remains the same: The goal is to capture areas on the island, gaining points as your team holds positions. The winning team will either hold all the areas, or have more points at the end of the match. You're able to grab any driveable vehicle, be it a boat, tank, jeep, or plane, and have at it. My own memories of *1942* are filled with watching dogfights spinning overhead, the losers parachuting as their flaming planes leave fiery trails in the sky.

Wake Island is shaped like someone's beaten up the letter V. The Japanese military is moored off the wide, welcoming mouth, and the American military is dug in. The engine creates a slightly cartoonish look for the sky and water, though not *as* cartoonish as

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+++ WWW.PCGAMER.COM +++

BATTLEFIELD IS BACK!

WAKEY WAKEY

Every major *Battlefield* game has had its own version of Wake Island. *1943*'s feels just like *1942*'s: the layout gives you a view of all the action. From one side you can see the other, and swim, boat, drive, or fly there to help the cause. Any old *Battlefield* hand will feel at home here.

Battlefield Heroes. You pick from a pared-down group of three character classes: infantry, anti-tank, or scout.

In my first try-out I spawn as infantry on the Japanese side. I rush for a boat and head to a village already in control of the Japanese. Then the bombers fly overhead, introducing me to the new airstrike mechanics: At strategic points you'll find bunkers that give you remote control of three-plane bombing runs. These are nowhere as nimble as the regular planes, but they carpet-bomb a larger area. The Frostbite engine, created for *Battlefield: Bad Company*, produces all kinds of sexy effects: trees splinter under tanks, the sides of buildings can be punched through by explosives. When there's nothing left of the building you're cowering in, you either think on your feet or die.

I die. And respawn on the island. The *Battlefield* jeeps have the potential for high comedy: I hop into one of these strangely speedy, tight-cornering vehicles and drive it into the trees, crushing them under my wheels. This is awesome: Only *Crysis*'s ludicrous DX10-only multiplayer mode comes close. A tank pops over the hill and fires a shell. I leap from my jeep and turn back to see it flip over, sparks and debris flying. It's how the elements come together that make *Battlefield* an idea worth revisiting. I keep telling myself that a 350MB game can't possibly be doing all of this—but it is.

> I attach TNT to a friendly aircraft

Everything in this demo is tinged with nostalgia. The best thing about the game (also being developed for consoles) is that I'm in a room full of console journalists, seeing this stuff for the first time. Time to show off the sort of awesome stunts I've been pulling in *Battlefield* for years.

I select the scout, run up to a friendly aircraft, and attach a stick of TNT. From the air I enjoy the battles scarring the Pacific island below, before spotting another plane. In a normal game it would be time for a dogfight, but I want to show off here. As we fly toward each other, I jump out. My parachute opens. The remote control for the TNT appears in my hands. Click.

As my plane detonates impressively, my enemy flies harmlessly through the debris.

My second attempt to show off a little later, by flying under a low bridge, ends with the destruction of the bridge and my plane. Again the engine excels: This is no pre-scripted collapse, but a thing of concussive beauty.

This is definitely *Battlefield* in form—and considerably more functional than before. Tarting it up in the new engine, tweaking a few fundamentals, has done nothing to break what's still an experience that delivers intense, silly chaos. For the projected price of under $20, *Battlefield 1943* could be a huge hit for nostalgic fans and new players alike.

/// CRAIG PEARSON ///

VITALS **DEVELOPER** DICE **PUBLISHER** EA **URL** WWW.BATTLEFIELD.COM

/// A plane versus a shed. We're taking bets on who will win. ///

/// Flying fighter planes into this bridge results in 'splodey bridge disease. ///

/// The three classes, left to right: Soldier, Commando, Gunner. ///

BATTLEFIELD HEROES

FIGHTING FOR FREEDOM, FOR FREE

This is the first time *PC Gamer* has ever put a free game on our cover. Thanks to the influence (or irrational fear) of piracy and the phenomenal success of some pioneering free games in Korea, we're at a point where one of the major PC game developers feels they can charge nothing for their next game.

Battlefield Heroes is a bright, simple, third-person team shooter with a pseudo World War II setting. It costs nothing to play, it's only 350MB to download, and there's no server browser: You're simply automatched with people of roughly your skill. It's funded by small ads on the game's launcher and website, and the ability for players to buy weapons and costumes that would otherwise take time to earn.

Heroes is a huge risk. Senior Producer Ben Cousins told us that in terms of simultaneous players, it will need to be the most popular *Battlefield* game of all time in order to be profitable. Their strategy for making sure that happens is to design their game while people are playing it: There have been two extensive closed beta tests, and there will be another beta version open to the public before the game's proper release in April.

THE PITCH
Free, easy, lightweight *Battlefield* with persistent character progression.

We've been playing in both, and *Heroes* is already fun. The third-person perspective feels like a hindrance at first, but once you perch your dapper grunt on the wing of a Spitfire during takeoff, it starts to make sense. There are no one-hit kills, which means the weapons do feel gamey rather than realistic, but that also eliminates the most tiresome moments of other *Battlefield* games.

It does feel like a return to the comic violence of *Battlefield 1942*, but the real joy of it is agonizing over which abilities to level up and which costume parts to unlock. Every player looks completely different, which adds a nice personal touch to the grudges and revenge stories that will surely play out.

"THE GREAT THING IS," says Cousins, "because we can monitor people's reactions to different features on the fly, we learn whether a feature is worth putting in or not. If we actually hit our targets in terms of how sticky and addictive and fun the game is without adding a certain feature, then we now realize we don't need to invest time in adding it."

Sticky is a word Cousins uses a lot. Since the mechanics of *Battlefield Heroes* are very simple, the game relies on persistent character development, Achievement-like "Missions," and a global metagame to keep players interested. As you play and level up, you earn Valor Points to buy

VITALS **DEVELOPER** DICE **PUBLISHER** EA **URL** WWW.BATTLEFIELD.COM

/// The Big Lebowski cast should be easy enough to make. ///

/// Weekend forecast: raining small suns. ///

new weapons and clothes, and Hero Points to unlock abilities or upgrade your current ones. If you choose to buy Points with real money, however, they can only be spent on costume parts, not upgrading abilities or weapons. Real cash can't buy you a bigger gun, unlike in real life.

The first closed beta launched without these features, and the result was sobering for the DICE team. "Because we had none of this persistence," Cousins explains, "and we only had two maps... people's average playing time was only a few hours." That's in total, rather than per session. *Heroes* just wasn't sticky.

> *Sticky* is a word Ben uses a lot

The second beta, with character progression and missions, is faring better. "We're looking at the graphs now, and it's certainly not trailing off as fast as we thought it would, and certainly not as fast as on the last beta, so we feel pretty good about the addictiveness of the game."

As noted, Missions task players with Achievement-style goals: "Kill five Commandos" or "Deal 1,000 points of damage to vehicles." But they can also have time-limits. "It's a really addictive way to play the game," says Cousins. "You're not just playing to have fun, or to win the round."

But isn't there a danger that personal objectives will distract players from teamwork? Cousins doesn't dodge the question: "It certainly does distract you from your teamwork, that's right. One of our stated goals with *Heroes* was to create a game that wasn't just about jumping in and, in a traditional *Battlefield* sense, trying to win the round."

The global map, referred to internally as the "metagame,"

/// Firing indiscriminately at villages is standard hero practice. ///

isn't in the current beta. When it does launch, it will be a way for players from the two factions to wrestle for control of the world.

Cousins elaborates: "You can point your character toward investing his Valor Points in any one of 12 fictional countries. So if you're Royal Army, you're putting your points into Belgium, and if the Royal Army has more points in Belgium at the end of the month, everyone who's invested points into that from the winning side would get some points back." It sounds like fun... although we think Belgium might actually be a real place.

"From a faction point of view," Cousins explains, "it's just the Royals versus the Nationals...but we'd like to create more of an overarching story to it and see the territories changing control. I don't know if you've played *PlanetSide*, but that's the kind of feel we want to create."

THE ROYALS ARE based on the Allies, and the Nationals are the Axis. You're free to create a Royal hero and a National one on the same account if you like, but you'll probably want to concentrate on one to level him up. The costume parts you buy for your heroes get more exotic as you level, so high-level characters often look nothing like World War II soldiers.

"Guys in the mime outfits and stuff will be uber-high level," Cousins warns. "The artists spent quite a lot of time thinking over this stuff. So the National army tends to be German-influenced uniforms, then it's the pirate look, a bit more of a goth look, sort of like Jack Sparrow, The Joker, kind of look."

"Then the Royal army goes more toward action heroes, so Mr. T, Indiana Jones...and then at the really high level, hockey-mask-wearing hooligan types. They're a scruffier faction and they're bigger, more muscular guys. Kind of [thugs]. In a kilt maybe, with a T-shirt that says 'I'm with stupid.' And a woolly hat."

Character progression is the most exciting element of *Heroes* in its current state. It's easy to get enthusiastic about upgrading, for example, the Commando's Poison Knife ability. And the fancy-dressed loons you see charging around certainly inspire the urge to earn more adventurous outfits. If you can't afford to buy them outright, you can, hilariously, rent that luxuriant pair of pantaloons for three days at a much-reduced fee. You'll just be naked when they expire, that's all.

Heroes is so different from previous *Battlefield* games, and so obviously simplified, that it's easy to be put off by it the first time you play. Keep playing. You may find that one of the three classes, once you unlock and understand its core abilities, suits you. *Battlefield Heroes'* Missions make it easy to achieve something in a 15-minute game, and once you're into it...well, it's sticky. /// TOM FRANCIS ///

THE PITCH
Four angry men in a very smashable world: the only full-formed single-player *Battlefield*.

BATTLEFIELD BAD COMPANY 2

NO EA JOKES PLEASE

From a PC gamer's perspective, *Bad Company* is the dark horse of the series: We never got it.

This console-only release was, uncharacteristically, a story-driven, faintly humorous, primarily single-player game, based around destruction. You were the leader in a rogue four-man squad of likeable loons who'd abandoned their duties to fight through open-ended levels in search of, um, gold.

> Gold Rush is more novel

The two multiplayer modes from *Bad Company* will return for the sequel: Conquest and Gold Rush. Conquest is the same flag-and-ticker mode we've been playing since *BF 1942*, which means there will be *three* new versions of it on the PC this year: *Heroes, 1943*, and *Bad Company 2*.

Gold Rush is more novel: One team is on offense, trying to break open crates of gold bars to unlock the next stage of the map. The defenders win if they can keep the crates intact until the round ends.

Vehicles are a key part of the *Bad Company* formula: Half the reason to build an engine with 90 percent destructible environments is to have a tank burst through a brick wall at the drop of a hat. DICE is hinting that they've got something special planned here: "*Bad Company 2* will take this to the next level," says Patrick Bach, Senior Producer at DICE. "We aim to deliver ultimate vehicle warfare. You won't have experienced this in any modern warfare game, and this is in both our single- and multiplayer." (I tried to think of things I haven't experienced in any modern warfare game, and came up with the emotionally exhausting dread of returning home to a spouse you no longer love. So that'll be interesting.)

Bach is tight-lipped to the point of absurdity about everything else. From my interview, I was able to glean that: "The player will be challenged to solve the problems presented to them in many different ways," "It's a true battlefield," and "The infantry fighting contains everything you'd expect." So, it's a game, on a battlefield, with soldiers in it. /// TOM FRANCIS ///

VITALS **DEVELOPER** DICE **PUBLISHER** EA **URL** WWW.BATTLEFIELD.COM/BADCOMPANY2

BATTLEFORGE

STRIKE WHILE THE IRON IS HOT, FROZEN, HEXED, OR ENTANGLED

/// Why are floaty heads always so angry? ///

/// Nothing penetrates the defenses of Tim "The Tower Spammer." ///

Last summer I sold a load of old Topps cards on eBay. What was striking was (a) the prices people were willing to pay for cards of shaggy-haired Belgian soccer players, and (b) how many decade-old unopened packets are up for sale. How could anyone resist tearing them open to see what's inside? That's the whole joy of it!

EA Phenomic, the German team behind this genre-blurring online RTS, understands the assumption that folk love tearing open foil envelopes full of Mysterious Cardy Goodness. To create *BattleForge,* they've plucked the heart from *Magic: The Gathering*, stitched it into the muscular torso of *Warcraft III*, then attached the limbs and head of *World of Warcraft*. The resulting Fun Golem is both a deeply seductive and a faintly disturbing creature.

At the sulfurous core of the game is a fast, charismatic fantasy RTS brimming with great units and spectacular violence. The tempo is kept high by two things: the omission of traditional base-building, and a "spawn anywhere" unit-summoning dynamic. Though you need to capture and tap scattered power sources to fund army construction, troops themselves can materialize anywhere on a map as long as a living friendly unit is nearby.

It sounds like a recipe for total chaos: How can I plan or protect my base if entire armies are materializing out of thin air every few minutes? Oh wait—I don't have a base.

And, in addition to the power cost, there are cool-down periods and monument requirements. Battle-turning goliaths like the Colossus and the Dreadnought are out of reach until you've built four monuments (the pre-located sites for which are usually close to power sources) and dedicated them to the appropriate faction.

NOW WE ARRIVE AT the really ingenious part: All units and spells belong to one of four factions and are represented by virtual cards. Before a match begins, rather than choosing a side or having one thrust upon you, you build a deck of up to 20 cards. The more cards you own, the more deck combinations and tactics are possible.

Brilliantly, DIY army-smithing applies to both single-player and multiplayer. Whether you're carving your way through the story or skirmishing with fellow skylords, you'll be doing it with a force you fashioned.

At the moment my current deck of choice—Slush II—is a mix of Frost and Fire. Early on in a fight, Master Archers and Thugs (orcs in football gear) wreak the majority of my havoc. Mid-game, I call upon Spitfires (magma-spewing sky galleons) and Tremors (stompy stonemen with mallet fists). In the final stages—assuming all is going to plan—Boom Brothers (goblin-crewed howitzers mounted on ogres) and Emberstrikes (fire-lancing geomorphs) shoulder most of the slaughter.

> Storming the map in a vast and angry conga line

And those units are just the tip of the iceberg/volcano. The basic Twilight Edition of *BattleForge* comes with four faction decks of 16 cards each, plus 3,000 BF points (in-game currency sufficient to purchase 12 eight-card booster packs). Right from the outset you're in possession of a good mix of the 200 card types, and the potential for crafting interesting and robust battlegroups is huge.

Your first taste of deck fashioning is likely to come in the campaign. On logging in (even solo play requires a net connection) you find yourself in the forge—a hub area in which auctions can be organized, cards traded, and units tested. In front of you is a large map. As missions unlock, they appear on this map. Some will be solo affairs, some will require the combined efforts of two, four, or even 12 players. Comrades are easily found. Just click to establish a game and strangers will come.

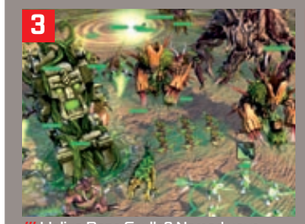
The missions themselves have a pleasing whiff of *Warcraft III* about them, and feel like they've been honed over many months for maximum fun. One excursion might involve escorting a treasure blimp through badlands; the next, exterminating Twilight-infected villages or destroying fortified walls blocking the path of a Titan-pursued potentate. Often in the co-op scenarios, different starting positions mean different

IN YOUR ELEMENT

I'M HALF FROST, HALF FIRE. WHAT ARE YOU?

/// Distrust anything with more than two legs, arms, or eyes? Pack your decks with Frosty humans. ///

/// Interested in blitzkrieg, arson, and demonology? You'll be wanting a hand full of Fire cards. ///



/// Idolize Bear Grylls? Named your daughter Juniper? Heal your way to victory with Nature. ///

/// Obsessed with skulls? Already made your own funeral arrangements? Shadow is for you. ///

/// The bright art style looks like the result of an explosion at the Crayola factory. ///

/// Playing co-op makes smashing things more fun. ///

/// Need, got, need, got, got, got, need, got. ///

/// Another multiplayer defeat beckons. ///

/// Wear a lot of purple? You may be undead. ///

roles. Red and Green could find themselves rescuing prisoners, while on the other side of the map, Blue and Yellow might be destroying siege artillery or overseeing an arcane ritual.

Invariably you'll bump into your brothers-in-arms at some point, and embark on *BattleForge*'s trademark activity: the Rampage of Kill. Storming through unconquered portions of a map in a vast angry conga line is a riot in both senses of the word. I'm grinning just thinking about it. One of the few things that could improve it is integrated voice chat—right now, everyone's too busy slaying to exchange typed messages.

SADLY, THE *WARCRAFT III* vibe doesn't extend to backstory brilliance. The plot cobwebbing all the missions together is poorly relayed, and stale as old buns. There's a book of lore in the forge that explains what the hell is going on, but, frankly, cutscenes and load-screen briefings should have had this covered. After many days of play all I can tell you about the story is: Twilight = bad, Rogan Kayle = good, and some lady with a name like a venereal disease has lost her mind thanks to a SoulStone (or possibly a SoulTree) and MUST BE STOPPED. And, oh yes, *wrath*—there's lots of that about.

> And, oh yes, *wrath*—there's lots of that

Crafting a coherent plot in a game where players can romp to victory with Frankenstein armies is obviously no easy task, but Phenomic should have done better.

Right now, fighting your fellow players is nowhere near as appealing as co-operating with them. Whatever the map, I seem to be getting trounced on a horribly regular basis. Losing RTS skirmishes is rarely fun. Losing them inside two minutes because you've been rushed by units you simply don't know how to counter is miserable.

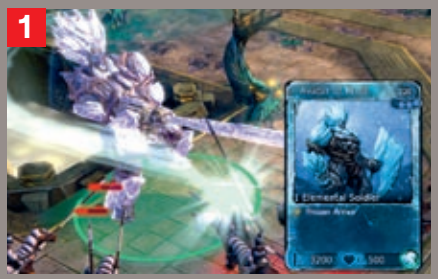
Such defeats bring bitter "They only won because they had the best deck!" feelings. Though there is something called a "tome mode" where each player takes to the field with a deck built from virgin booster packs, there's no option to play with the vanilla 16-card faction decks, so there is never a truly level playing field. For all its checks and balances, *BattleForge* would seem to favor the player with the fattest deck.

Not bothered? Only intend to play single-player? Sorry, things aren't quite that simple. To have any chances of conquering the later campaign challenges (many of which are

RARER THAN ROCKING-HORSE POO

DO A LITTLE DANCE IF YOU FIND ONE OF THESE ULTRA-RARES IN A BOOSTER PACK

1



/// He's big, he's mean, he's the Avatar of Frost. This walking damage sponge will turn your foe's blood to ice and their knees to jelly. Mmm...jelly. ///

2

/// Harvesters summon skeleton squads and draw strength from nearby corpses. Their steel claws are perfect for wall demolition. ///

3

/// When Parasite Swarms aren't reciting pi to ten million places, they're mind-controlling the feeble-brained or zapping them with a mental *fzzzzzt*! ///

UMBRAGE AT THE SUNBRIDGE

just harder versions of earlier ones) you'll need to upgrade your cards. Upgrades—non-tradeable cards dished out as single-player rewards—can only be utilized with the help of multiplayer victory tokens. A lack of success in the arenas means the story's later stages will be bastard-hard.

BUT THAT'S NOT THE most controversial aspect of the design. What's creating the most furor in forums is the availability of *BattleForge* points. Many different currencies—gold, honor tokens, battle tokens—slosh about inside the game (most for no apparent reason) but *BF* points are the only way to buy boosters and cards at auctions. Once you've exhausted your initial fund (3,000BF) you must cough up real cash to acquire more. For one dollar you can buy 100BF, so an eight-card booster pack costs around $2.50.

Bargain? I'm genuinely undecided. You could argue that buying a few booster packs a month is no different from paying an MMO subscription. Even if you don't get cards you need, you can always auction off the cream of your haul. Every pack is guaranteed to include one "rare" card. Perhaps one in 20 will contain a precious "ultra-rare." That $2.50 is also buying you the nerve-tingly excitement of a treasure-hunt.

The trouble with the MMO argument is that *BattleForge,* for all its savage splendor and addictiveness, doesn't provide the player-versus-environment scope and color of a *WoW* or a *Lord of the Rings Online.* There isn't that comforting sense of progress, either. You can spend 30 minutes on a mission, get defeated, and emerge with absolutely nothing.

The game's best defense against accusations of commercial cynicism is something I hinted at earlier: extra cards are by no means essential. The initial batch will take you far, as long as you upgrade them (meaning plenty of multiplayer play). Rares and ultra-rares will turn heads on the battlefield, but they aren't silver bullets. A skilful pauper with a modest card selection will still be able to vanquish a talentless spendthrift with a monstrous stack.

As long as you approach *BattleForge* knowing that it will take all your money and leave you sleeping under cardboard in an underpass given half a chance, it's hard to envisage disappointment with its deck-building and co-op carnage. /// TIM STONE ///

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Inspired build-your-own army system; creative unit designs; *Magic: The Gathering*-style card trading; awesome co-op rampages.

LOWS// No in-game voice chat; too many pointless in-game currencies; unbalanced multiplayer battles; meaningless mess of a plot; booster packs cost real cash.

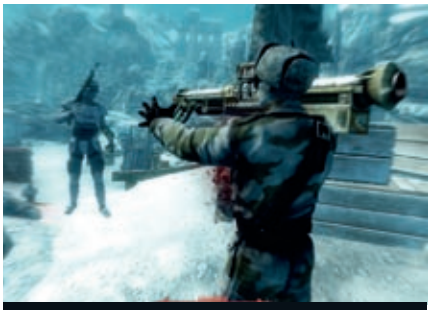
BOTTOM LINE// *BattleForge* adds the benefits of collectable card games to a colorful and action-packed fantasy RTS, but with those benefits come the downsides of lopsided battles and added cost.

0% BETTER >> 100% **81%**

++ EXCELLENT ++

VITALS // DEVELOPER: EA PHENOMIC **PUBLISHER:** EA **REQUIREMENTS:** 1.8GHZ CPU, 1GB RAM, 128MB GEFORCE 6 SERIES/RADEON 9500 VIDEOCARD, INTERNET CONNECTION **RECOMMENDED:** 2GHZ DUAL-CORE CPU, 2GB RAM, 512MB GEFORCE 8800GT/RADEON 4850 VIDEOCARD **MAX PLAYERS:** 12 **ESRB:** T **DRM:** ONLINE ACTIVATION; 5 INSTALLS; NON-REVOCABLE

/// Psst! Behind you! Emote, damn it! ///



/// Chinese soldiers are easy kills. ///

/// Get your own robot buddy! ///

FALLOUT 3: OPERATION ANCHORAGE

THE FIRST DOWNLOADABLE ADD-ON FALLS FLAT

While *Operation Anchorage* creates what it sets out to—a combat-focused experience set during the *Fallout* universe's biggest war—its ambitions are oddly opposed to everything *Fallout 3* does well. It's like *Call of Duty* letting you into Hitler's bunker, only to challenge you to a Fuhrer-themed round of *Peggle*.

(Clearly, you'd only get one ball. But I digress.)

Most of the action takes place inside a military training simulator, which makes little sense unless the U.S. military of 2077 wanted recruits to build tactics around the easy availability of health and ammo recharge points scattered throughout enemy installations. The quest is a three-part corridor shooter with a few hints of freedom, but not many. No moral decisions to make, no real characters, and annoyingly, no feel for what the titular battle was all about. It's a small-scale scrap, with precious little background information or narrative.

Because it's just simulated, you can't take wasteland items into the battlefield. You do keep your character's stats, and can still use VATS on demand. As god of the small gun, the whole module was a cakewalk for my character; for other builds, it can be trickier.

> On the plus side, you get goodies at the end

You're rarely alone, but friendly AI is not one of *Fallout 3*'s strengths. The second mission lets you summon troops at will to fight alongside you, but they're not particularly useful unless you're a specialist in unarmed combat, staring in confusion at that metal death tube in your sweaty fists. On the plus side, you get goodies at the end, including an extremely nice sword and power armor.

Anchorage makes for a couple of mildly diverting hours, and the combat focus and new setting are anything but more of the same. But the changes in gameplay are mostly for the worse, and it's not much content for $10 (or 800 Microsoft points—you have to deal with the Games for Windows Live Marketplace to buy it). Here's hoping the next DLC is equally ambitious, but plays closer to *Fallout 3*'s many strengths.

/// RICHARD COBBETT ///

VITALS **DEVELOPER:** BETHESDA **PUBLISHER:** BETHESDA **REQUIREMENTS:** FALLOUT 3 **MAX PLAYERS:** 1 **ESRB:** M

/// Blue and gray is the new brown and gray. ///

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// A couple of solid hours of gameplay; cool new gear at the end.

LOWS// *Fallout* doesn't do shooter gameplay very well; no choices or expanded story.

BOTTOM LINE// It's an interesting diversion and a break from *Fallout*'s post-apocalyptic setting and gameplay, but *Operation Anchorage* doesn't play to the game's roleplaying strength.

0% BETTER >> 100% **63%**

++ ABOVE AVERAGE ++

THE CHRONICLES OF RIDDICK:

ASSAULT ON DARK ATHENA

DEAR DIARY, TODAY I GUTTED 200 MEN...

I was stamping three guards to death when I realized that *I* was the monster in *Riddick*. Is it any wonder that when the fourth guard blundered into that room, he attempted to shoot me after seeing his colleagues on the ground in fetal positions with bits of their faces stuck to my boot heels?

In *The Chronicles of Riddick: Assault on Dark Athena* (henceforth known as *Dark Athena*), you are the creature of the dark, sliding out from the shadows to snap, pummel, maim, and otherwise reduce the general population of mindless drone guards to crumpled heaps. In any other game, you'd be hunting, well, you. Riddick's story is split over two included games, the first being a remake of the original melee-focused first-person shooter *Escape from Butcher Bay* from 2004, and *Dark Athena*, taking up the story after Riddick's escape from the prison aboard a spaceship. It continues the good work of the original, melding adult themes and dark characters with an interesting anti-hero.

/// This is what Vin Diesel does to people who didn't go to see *Fast & Furious*. ///

Prisoners and mercenaries respect violence, and controlling Riddick there's ample opportunity to practice the art. The mechanics haven't evolved much since 2004: Riddick can use his fists, shivs, bats, and eventually guns to slaughter his foes. The melee system enables four different strikes with every weapon, using the WASD keys to move before tapping the left mouse to execute and the right mouse to block. It's all in the timing: Controlling the flow of the fight gives much more satisfying and devastating results than spamming the mouse button. The latter will see a series of punches and slashes that can win a fight; the former rewards with awful (in a good way), hideous death animations. You'll see screwdrivers slide easily into armpits, knives popping eyeballs, and, if you block a gun melee attack, Riddick will spin it under the attacker's jaw and perform a skillful lobotomy.

SHADOWS CONCEAL RIDDICK. It's particularly relevant in *Dark Athena*, where the entire ship is stitched together with fluorescent lights and slanted shadows. Riddick's enhanced eyes can see where his enemies need flashlights, and sneaking up on them enables instant kills. There are a few flavors of guards: meaty humans, self-controlled drones that are unable to see in the dark, and remote-controlled drones that can track you down with flashlights, but revert to the autonomous type when the link is severed by an attack. The AI is stupid, and guards can be lured away from their prescribed patrol patterns into the shadows, where you'll have a chance to swiftly dispatch them one at a time.

In both games, jailors' efforts to contain Riddick eventually escalate to a tipping point where the action goes from being a stealth bludgeoner to something more like a traditional shooter. Aside from the usual shotguns and assault rifles you're provided, a tranquilizer gun renders guards helpless as you finish them off, and can sever the remote-controlled drones' connection. The most entertaining weapon is *Dark Athena*'s Scar gun, which fires remotely detonated sticky explosives. The mini-bombs are a very powerful concussive force, killing single guards with one bang, and you can line up five at a time for boss fights and fun times (see above).

AS YOU'RE GIVEN DIFFERENT tools, the environments shift to accommodate. Later levels in *Dark Athena* are a mixture of ingenious locations, like in the ship's gravity core where the reward for offing the guards is to see them scooped away by the core, and slightly dull ones on the surface of a planet. Whenever the game places you in shooting galleries (you'll find many in the second half of *Dark Athena*), it does tend to take Riddick out of his element and remove much of what's unique and fun. The boss fights, in particular, are tedious, numbered attack scenarios.

Their tedium highlights the largest flaw across both games: the checkpoint-save system and lack of quick-save. On more than one occasion it saved when I had just a sliver of health, forcing continual restarts when facing a boss or a room full of enemies. In some ways it forced me to improvise, but dying over and over through no fault of my own is an appalling decision by Starbreeze.

It's certainly off-putting, but Riddick is too distinctly adult, funny, and fun for that misstep to keep me away.

/// CRAIG PEARSON ///

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Excellent melee combat system; effective stealth system; adult humor.

LOWS// Dumb guard AI, some uninteresting settings, no quick-save.

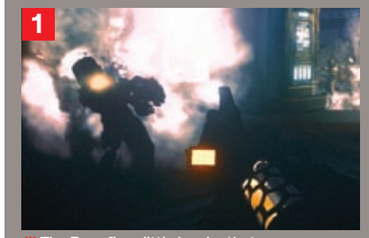
BOTTOM LINE// This chronicle of Riddick's is a brutally enjoyable stealth shooter that revisits and builds on the success of the original *Escape from Butcher Bay*.

0% BETTER >> 100% **80%**

++ EXCELLENT ++

VITALS **DEVELOPER:** STARBREEZE **PUBLISHER:** ATARI **REQUIREMENTS:** 2GHZ DUAL CORE CPU, GEFORCE 6800/RADEON 2600 XT VIDEOCARD, 1GB RAM (2GB VISTA), INTERNET CONNECTION **RECOMMENDED:** CORE 2 DUO 2.4GHZ, 512MB GEFORCE 8800GT/RADEON 4850 VIDEOCARD, 2GB RAM **MAX PLAYERS:** 12 **ESRB:** M **DRM:** ONLINE ACTIVATION; 3 INSTALL LIMIT; NON-REVOCABLE

RIDDICK'S GOT A BRAND-NEW GUN

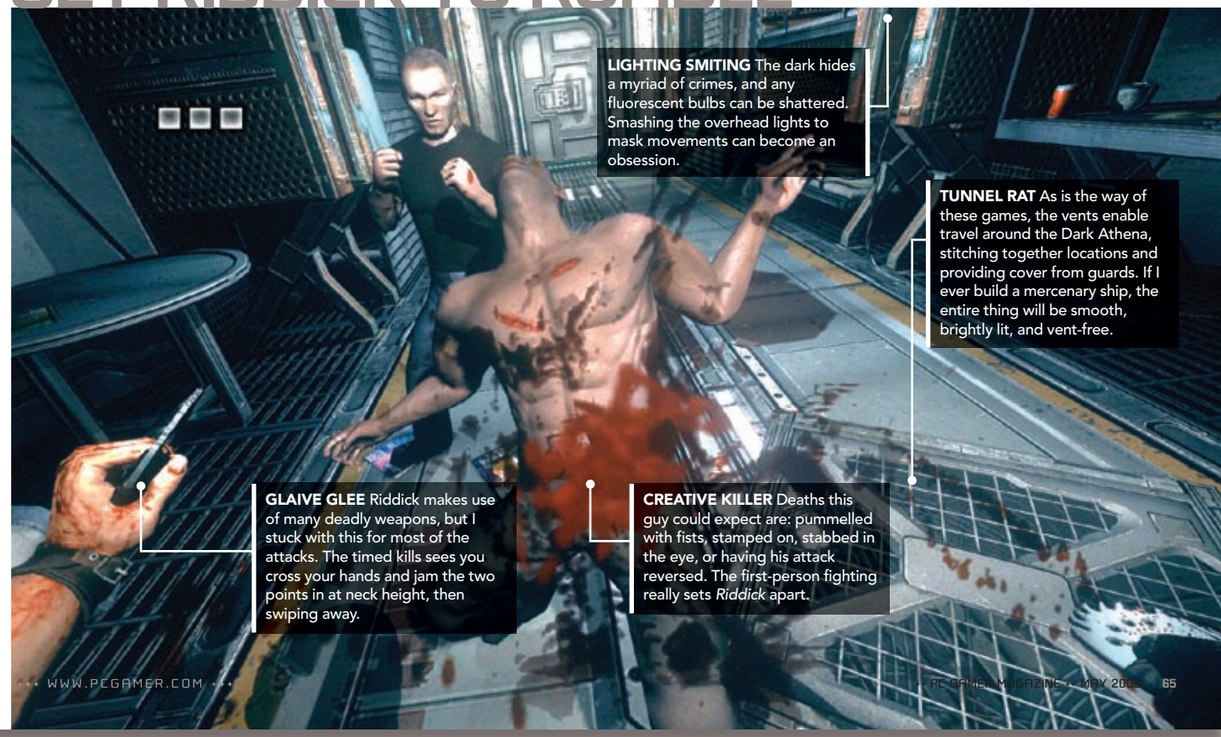


1 /// The Scar fires little bombs that you can 'splode with the right-click button. Handy for killing, particularly if you hold off and rig multiple guards for a one-button kill. ///

2 /// In some puzzles you need to use the Scar's bombs, like in this one where you use a detonation to move a block. ///

3 /// And when the death is dealt, the Scar's unlimited ammo lets you play with the bodies, launching them across the level for fun. ///

GET RIDDICK TO RUMBLE



LIGHTING SMITING The dark hides a myriad of crimes, and any fluorescent bulbs can be shattered. Smashing the overhead lights to mask movements can become an obsession.

TUNNEL RAT As is the way of these games, the vents enable travel around the Dark Athena, stitching together locations and providing cover from guards. If I ever build a mercenary ship, the entire thing will be smooth, brightly lit, and vent-free.

GLAIVE GLEE Riddick makes use of many deadly weapons, but I stuck with this for most of the attacks. The timed kills sees you cross your hands and jam the two points in at neck height, then swiping away.

CREATIVE KILLER Deaths this guy could expect are: pummelled with fists, stamped on, stabbed in the eye, or having his attack reversed. The first-person fighting really sets *Riddick* apart.

/// Helicopter gunships are the paper to tanks' rock and armored transports' scissors. ///

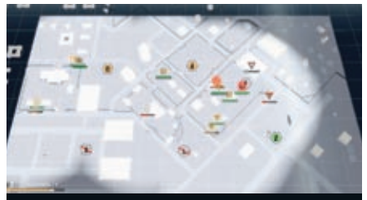
TOM CLANCY'S ENDWAR

CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?

I've waited a long time for a game that actually listens when I shout at it. Well, specifically I wanted one where yelling "Die you bastards!" would cause the enemy to explode, but this is the next best thing.

/// Just say "Deploy tanks" to have reinforcements flown in from off screen. Would you like fries with that? ///

The voice-command system in *Tom Clancy's EndWar*, which lets you use a microphone to coordinate near-future military hardware in a World War III real-time strategy, comes off as gimmicky at first. You'll have to speak in a William Shatner-like cadence (unit…one…attack…hostile…four…Khaaaaaaan!) until it learns your voice a little, but once I got used to it—and it got used to me—it was surprisingly effective. My troops correctly interpreted orders roughly 95 percent of the time—enough that I barely ever felt the need to issue orders with the mouse. Being able to command a battle by barking orders really does give you a new sense of authority.



/// In SitRep view I can see everything and what number they are—but which of my transports are carrying soldiers? ///

Of course, the mouse and keyboard has proven the best interface for real-time strategies because of its speed and accuracy, and voice command sacrifices that advantage for the sake of novelty. But *EndWar* slows down the pacing enough to let you speak commands that would've taken one-tenth the time to click, and units in combat manage to stay alive long enough for you to tell them what to do. The one exception is helicopter gunships—under anti-aircraft fire they often literally fall out of the sky faster than you can bark "Unit five, move to bravo!"

Fortunately, there's no base-building to divert your attention from verbally abusing your troops, aside from upgrading captured uplink centers to enable battlefield support abilities like airstrikes and EMP attacks. The goal of most maps is to either secure the majority of these uplinks or completely destroy the enemy, and it's difficult to do the latter without first accomplishing the former. There's a resource economy only in that the more uplinks you hold, the faster you can call in reinforcements, so don't expect a deep management game.

When you're not in battles, the war campaign is managed from a global screen, which looks like it's going to give you full control over where to fight next but then disappointingly limits you to a couple of options per turn—though the choices you make do have a major impact on the way the war plays out. From this screen you can also spend credit earned in battle to improve your veteran units, allowing you to pump up and specialize with your favorites.

VITALS **DEVELOPER:** UBISOFT **PUBLISHER:** UBISOFT **REQUIREMENTS:** 1.8GHZ CORE 2 DUO, 1GB RAM (2GB VISTA), 256MB GEFORCE 7600/RADEON X1600 VIDEOCARD, **RECOMMENDED:** 2.4GHZ CORE 2 DUO, 2GB RAM, 512MB GEFORCE 8800GT/RADEON 4850, HEADSET WITH MIC **MAX PLAYERS:** 4 **ESRB:** T

/// Upgrading your troops and vehicles beefs up their stats, and can add cool new armor or doodads to the models. ///

> *EndWar* is the best implementation of voice command in games in a long time, if not ever

But *EndWar* turns a deaf ear to concerns about the interface doing a lackluster job of telling you which enemy is which unless you mouse over them, so you're forced to rely on the poor camera and mouse controls more than would be ideal. A "sitrep" mode gives you a zoomed-out tactical view of the map (as long as you have a command vehicle deployed), but it doesn't have your unit info displayed on screen.

Because of the inherently basic nature of a strategy game with no base building, no player-controlled unit abilities, and three essentially identical factions, missions become repetitive sooner than other games. There are no units available at the end of a fight, or the entire campaign for that matter, that weren't available from the start, so each battle plays out pretty much the same except for the map. To *EndWar*'s credit, the several dozen maps offer a good variety of settings.

In multiplayer, the need for speed and precision will make you want to abandon the voice controls in favor of the mouse, but that's experiencing *EndWar* at its most frustrating. Playing co-op against two AI players is probably the best way to play it with a friend.

EndWar isn't the most strategically deep or visually stunning of games—its tanks and choppers pale in comparison to *World in Conflict*—but it *is* the best implementation of voice command in games in a long time, if not ever. Even though there's a long way to go before this mode of control replaces the mouse, it wins some serious points by delivering a very unique and very playable gaming experience.

Finally, a warning: This is not a game you can play quietly with your headphones on. If there's anyone else within earshot while you're playing, you're going to sound completely ridiculous. /// DAN STAPLETON ///

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Voice command system actually works well; good pacing; wide variety of maps.

LOWS// Clumsy mouse and camera controls; shallow strategy; repetitive gameplay.

BOTTOM LINE// *EndWar* successfully pulls off voice command in a real-time strategy game better than we could have hoped, and this new command experience carries the simple gameplay a lot further than it would have gone on its own.

0% BETTER >> 100% **77%**

++ GOOD ++

LEND ME YOUR EARS

/// When the law gets in your way, grab it by the ear and give it a drubbing. ///

/// Next on Fox: Ballroom Dancing Gone Wrong. ///

WATCHMEN: THE END IS NIGH

YOU WILL COOPERATE

In a decidedly retro move with no justification that makes any sense at all to me, *Watchmen* offers co-op play that's offline, split-screen only. And since the game is pretty awful with mouse-and-keyboard, you basically need two gamepads along with two gamers willing to crowd around one monitor for a console-style game. The execution is decent enough, but it's just not a reality for most of us.

THE END COMES QUICKLY, TOO

I like punching things as much as the next guy. It's the perfect solution to just about any conundrum. Angry? Punch something. Happy? Punch something. Hungry? Punch something. Need to make a download-only tie-in to a blockbuster movie adaptation of what's universally hailed as one of the greatest graphic novels of the 20th century? Punch something!

So it goes with *Watchmen: The End Is Nigh*, a prequel story focusing on the ferociously feral Rorschach and his tech-savvy partner Nite Owl. The conceit here? This is set in the early '70s, about a dozen years before the events of the classic comic, allowing you to experience a caper alluded to in the original storyline playing as the crime-fighting duo in their prime.

In other words, you get to kick (and punch) a whole lot of ass.

And that about sums up this entire game—all five hours of it. You start off with a prison riot, requiring you to punch your way through a horde of incarcerated hooligans. Next, you square off against the Knot-Top gang at a broken-down amusement park. After that, you face down bikers in a maze of back alleys. You get the idea…

Good thing all that punching is as solid as can be. You'll get nothing revolutionary here—this is old-fashioned combo-based beatdowns, with light attacks, heavy attacks, and throws, along with a few specials moves for each character. But what a rush it can be when you plow through waves of cops and mercenaries, pulling off a series of brutal finishing moves, leaving a trail of battered bodies in your wake! At least it all looks brilliant, with detailed environments, incredible character models for our two heroes, and some stunning lighting effects.

Unfortunately, that's *all* you get. The story never develops to its full potential, the levels provide no puzzles, and exploration is limited to peeking around a corner to see if there's a power-up nestled behind that dumpster.

Best to think of *Watchmen* as great fan-service and leave it at that. Finally, you get to punch things as Rorschach and Nite Owl—reason enough for some of you to shell out less than $20 for this quickie. For the rest of you, perhaps punching baddies just isn't enough. I humbly disagree, but I fully understand.

/// GARY STEINMAN ///

VITALS **DEVELOPER:** DEADLINE GAMES **PUBLISHER:** WARNER BROS. INTERACTIVE **REQUIREMENTS:** 1.8GHZ DUAL CORE CPU, 1GB RAM, 256MB GEFORCE 6800/RADEON X800 VIDEOCARD **RECOMMENDED:** 2GB RAM, 512MB GEFORCE 8800GT/RADEON 4850, 2 GAMEPADS **MAX PLAYERS:** 2 **ESRB:** M **DRM:** STEAM

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Satisfying beat-em-up action; great job of capturing the essence of these iconic characters.

LOWS// Short, with limited replay value; extremely straightforward; offline split-screen co-op only.

BOTTOM LINE// Finally, fans get to play as these two beloved comic heroes. But while the game does them justice in terms of combat, it doesn't do enough to raise itself beyond being just a solid (albeit fun) brawler.

0% BETTER >> 100% **71%**

++ GOOD ++

/// The maps are sprawling, with dozens of little dramas playing out by themselves. ///

/// Vehicles and scenery alike are excellently explodey. ///

MEN OF WAR

ANOTHER VICTORY FOR SELF-EXPLANATORY GAME NAMES

Should the bone balloon of your skull be good at retaining reams of quasi-useless information, you might recall our love for the 2004 strategy, *Soldiers: Heroes of World War II* (September '04 issue, 83%).

The Russian RTS was a minor revelation, eschewing the *Command & Conquer* model and instead heading for the handsome realm of fiddly, scripted realism. It proficiently balanced simulation and accessibility by delivering a beautifully detailed 3D world populated by heroic men. *Men of War* is its direct successor, and achieves exactly the same things, only this time with more detail, greater visual flair, and an even keener sense of the history of World War II.

The *Men of War* campaign begins with an epic, wide-roaming series of battles and skirmishes punctuated by the adventures of a pair of Russian conscripts, then moves on into German and Allied campaigns after a few hours. This is a colossal game, in which each level can take up to an hour to get through. These missions can be replayed in co-op mode too, and are so dynamic that they will never unfold in quite the same way twice.

The first two levels serve as a useful microcosm of the entire game. The first sees you controlling just a handful of soldiers, patching up a tank, killing some German soldiers in a village with said tank, and then fighting for control of a hill. It's a process of critical micro-management, where a single mistake could potentially see your tank destroyed and your heroic protagonist sent to an early grave.

That said, this is also a game where individual units display astonishing autonomy. The little guys will take cover, shoot at nearby enemies, or even patch themselves up if they have a medical kit. Yet all the macro level stuff, such as designating a primary target, heading off to new areas, or searching the inventories of dead soldiers (and every soldier has an individual inventory) still has to be done by hand. Your helpful omnipotence will decide the fate of these brave few.

THE SECOND LEVEL demonstrates this mix of autonomy and careful management admirably, with the unit count suddenly upped to dozens of soldiers, deployed guns, and a handful of tanks. You can interfere and tweak the actions of any unit on the field, but if you just leave them alone they'll still engage the enemy, and even perform heroic actions such as lobbing anti-tank grenades onto vehicles or holding a point behind cover until they are utterly overwhelmed. As you watch these micro-level dramas play out all by themselves, you start to realize how apt the title of the game is: These little dudes on the field are fighting and dying for your objective, and will act even if you do not. There's a weird flicker of poignancy to the discovery that every soldier on your side has his own name.

Before we move on, I have to come back again to the idea of *detail*. This is a game that thrives because of the detail the development team has imbued it with. Partly this is in the environment design, the AI, and the comprehensive animations, but it's also in the dynamic nature of the game entities. Everything solid can serve as cover for your men—a tank might provide a moving shield from light arms fire, and a destroyed one can still make for a new beachhead as you assault an enemy position. Little ghost images show how your men can be deployed against a trench, wall, fence, or haystack. And almost everything is destructible, too. Heaps of sandbags will be sent flying by a shell hit, while even sturdy factory buildings will be ripped apart by an extended tank battle, revealing the guts of machinery inside.

> A game that surprised me again and again

ULTIMATELY, *MEN OF WAR* provides a superb battlefield on which you can prove yourself, with overwhelming odds providing the backdrop for astonishing victories. It's often too hard, and a little too obscure, and will be off-putting for people expecting professional voice-acting and Americanized accessibility. Not everyone will appreciate *Men of War*'s fearless approach. The game is riddled with tricky foibles, such as poor pathfinding, or situations from which it's impossible to recover. Not all of the level design is especially good, either, which can lead to multiple reloads of checkpoints as you attempt to heave your way out of an impossible situation. These frustrations do mount up over time, especially when later levels become too hard to beat sensibly, even on easy settings.

Nevertheless, this is a virtuoso display of strategy game creation, and a splendid experience for gamers with a modicum of patience. It's a game that surprised me again and again, over many hours of hungry play. Sure, it's somewhat frustrating, but don't let that dissuade you from plunging your spare time into a game that pays off in special brain gold.

/// JIM ROSSIGNOL ///

LIFE AND DEATH ON THE RUSSIAN FRONT

WHERE OTHER RTS GAMES FEAR TO TREAD

/// Snipers are a useful addition to any fight. You can get them to climb trees for extra range. ///

/// Tanks are lethal, but a single infantryman with a sticky grenade can disable or destroy them. ///

/// The trenches cut across many maps can be crucial, especially if you've got a few heavy guns. ///

/// This gun emplacement is defending a port. During the Sevastopol evacuation it is turned inland. ///

WAR MACHINES NEED LOVE TOO

VITALS **DEVELOPER:** BEST WAY **PUBLISHER:** ASPYR/1C **REQUIREMENTS:** PIII 1.8GHZ, 512MB RAM, 128MB GEFORCE 3/RADEON 9600 VIDEOCARD **RECOMMENDED:** DUAL-CORE CPU, 2GB RAM, 256MB 8800GT/RADEON 4850 VIDEOCARD **MAX PLAYERS:** 4 **ESRB:** M

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Extreme detail; total terrain destructability, dynamic missions; co-op play.

LOWS// Frequently frustrating; poor pathfinding; inconsistent level design quality.

BOTTOM LINE// An aptly named game, *Men of War* will surprise strategy aficionados with its detail and depth.

0% BETTER >> 100% **85%**

++ EXCELLENT ++

/// Gas masks: the savior of animators and caricaturists everywhere. ///

NECROVISION

ICH BIN EIN CRAPBURGER

It's the first-person shooter with long hair and a leather jacket. It has tattoos and piercings. It plays power-chord electric guitar through a distorted amplifier. It smokes those Death cigarettes that were briefly available in the '90s. It is a European metal band. Like most hard-riffing solo-mongers, *Necrovision* is ludicrously unfashionable. But it just doesn't care.

The reference points are *Doom*, *Serious Sam*, and *Painkiller*, rather than more contemporary shooters. This wouldn't be a bad thing at all, and if *Necrovision* had managed to mainline the pace and energy of those foundational shooters, it might well have excelled on the skull-draped stage of shooterdom.

But all of its talk of undead and a parallel WWI battlefield where demons came out of the ground is a messy footnote to the game. Not even a real footnote, but one scribbled in the margin by a stoned student. He assumed that a constant barrage of zombies, one-liners ("Respect...my skillz!") and murderous Germanic archetypes was all a game required to be entertaining. But he was wrong. His tastes had been irredeemably warped by years of dyeing his hair black and reading *Lobo* comics.

> Dual-wielded gatling guns do not redeem it

Necrovision is a time-warp, a mummified design accidentally unearthed and allowed to walk upon the Earth. Confusing level design, ubiquitously muddy visuals, and excruciating cutscenes do nothing to aid the mistaken muddle that is the story. Dual-wielded gatling guns do not redeem it.

There's no reason why games had to take the path they did, except that some evolutionary trends tend to win out—the ones that make gaming more fun. *Necrovision* doesn't offer a vision of an alternative path, much as I wish it did. There is no "retro-FPS" clarity here, in the way there is with *Quake Live*. No, this is a bewildering appeal to the old gods, the ones who were smelly and talked in sentences you assumed to be riddles, but were actually just poorly translated.

/// JIM ROSSIGNOL ///

/// Dudes appear, dudes get shot. And so on. ///

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Lots of zombies to kill; some old-school FPS appeal; dual-wielded gatling guns.

LOWS// Confusing level design; muddy visuals; mess of a story.

BOTTOM LINE// *Necrovision* attempts to tap into the simple joy of blasting German zombies, but fails to infuse its action with the fundamental energy and pacing that makes games like *Serious Sam* a blast.

0% BETTER >> 100% **35%**

++ DON'T BOTHER ++

VITALS // DEVELOPER: THE FARM 51 **PUBLISHER:** ASPYR/1C **REQUIREMENTS:** P4 2.4GHZ, 1GB RAM (1.5GB VISTA), 256MB GEFORCE 6600/RADEON X1600 VIDEOCARD **RECOMMENDED:** 1.8GHZ CORE 2 DUO, 2GB RAM, 512MB GEFORCE 8800GT/RADEON 4850 **MAX PLAYERS:** 16 **ESRB:** M

WANTED: WEAPONS OF FATE

BENDING SPOONS IS FOR CHUMPS

If Wesley Gibson had to pay a quarter to the swear jar for every F, B, A, or C-bomb dropped, *Wanted: Weapons of Fate* would pay for itself in the first hour of gameplay. The game immediately follows the events of last year's equally profane action film about Gibson joining a secret society of super-assassins that takes their orders from a napkin-making machine. But the fact that the main character does more cursing than I did while playing is a favorable sign for a game based on a film.

SURE, IT'S SHORT, straightforward, and derivative (direct hat-tipping to *Max Payne* for the slow-motion inspiration, please), but these traits are a good fit. *Wanted*'s most vaunted feature is the supernatural ability to curve a bullet's trajectory. It's a mechanic that adds something new into a cover-based game; rack up "adrenaline" by popping enemies, then spend it on arcing ammo and other slow-mo feats to kill more efficiently. Wiring a bullet around barriers to wound enemies is as easy as bending a line in Photoshop—tap the spacebar to grab cover, hold shift and left-click to lock a target, then drag your mouse to an angle that hooks the slug into your foe. All of this controls smoothly and logically with a mouse and keyboard (*better* than a gamepad)—thank you, Grin, for treating the PC version as more than an afterthought.

Bending projectiles is greatly satisfying for special kills, but you do the bulk of your slaughter during slow-mo leaps between cover during which you can pick off the unremarkable and repetitive enemies at will. All four bosses can be beaten by applying this move, which represent a missed opportunity to break up *Wanted*'s strictly linear gameplay with a different gimmick or two.

Still, as a quickie shooter it gets the job done—the cover system is intuitive and useful, ragdoll and blood effects give good visual feedback for successful shots, and shiny character models look great. I do wish the environments sported more destructible scenery—the lack of touches like exploding fruit and prevalent concrete columns that chip away when you shoot 'em (they pretty much only exist in boss battles) may be the only thing holding *Wanted* back from being on par with simple-but-entertaining action games like *Stranglehold*. Its greatest weakness, though, it its cost-to-length ratio; being single-player-only and around six hours long, it's hard to imagine us bending open our wallet to pay the full $49.99 for *Wanted*.

/// EVAN LAHTI ///

/// James McAvoy's stand-in does a pretty good job putting a voice in Wesley's foul mouth. ///

VITALS **DEVELOPER:** GRIN **PUBLISHER:** WB INTERACTIVE **REQUIREMENTS:** DUAL-CORE CPU, 2 GB RAM, GEFORCE 8 SERIES/RADEON 3870 VIDEOCARD **RECOMMENDED:** CORE 2 DUO E6540, 2 GB RAM, GEFORCE 8800GT/RADEON 4850 **MAX PLAYERS:** 1 **ESRB:** M **DRM:** DISC CHECK

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Easy-to-use cover system; pleasant popcorn action; perfect mouse and keyboard controls; visually appealing.

LOWS// Very brief and linear; repetitive enemies; underwhelming bosses; only four weapons.

BOTTOM LINE// A pretty but simple action game that makes the right decision to not attempt to be something more than it is and concentrates on a well-executed bullet-curving gimmick. It just happens to be overpriced at $50.

0% BETTER >> 100% **68%**

++ ABOVE AVERAGE ++

CODENAME: PANZERS – COLD WAR

TURNING UP THE HEAT...A LITTLE BIT

While in reality the Cold War was won by diplomacy and economics, *Codename: Panzers – Cold War* has decided that's a bit dull. Real wars are fought with bullets and dying. Thus, history must be re-written.

Basically, this is the *Codename* series recognizing that while we love bloodshed and period dress, we're bored with World War II.

The clock has been wound forward to 1949: Russia has tired of sharing control of Berlin with the West and decided some fightin' is in order.

The advantage of being close to WWII in era, location, and units is a feeling of authenticity that fictional conflicts often lack. The disadvantage is that it also retains the musty dullness that's come to characterize the period. This is still battles over Spandau prison, Berlin, and other locales recognizable from a dozen other games, fought mainly with units from the '40s.

The plot does offer some alternate reality fun. Through cutscenes we learn that Stalin is in league with the toadish villain from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and that they're after nukes for the motherland. Oh, that wacky Stalin.

SO BEGINS AMERICA'S BATTLE

to push the invading Russkies back out of Europe, with the help of their ever-faithful sidekick NATO. Each mission is broken down into objectives either mandatory, optional, or conditional. The mandatory ones mostly involve defending a base, attacking a base, or both. Certain tasks are more specific—repair a dam or defend a retreating convoy—but the strategy required is almost always the same. Get a posse of tanks together, shoot at the enemy a lot, and overwhelm their forces with your greater strength and/or numbers.

There's an almost hack-and-slash style of satisfaction to this—explosions feel good—but with so little tactical nuance required, the lack of variety fast spreads from the setting to the action.

Optional objectives refer to other Points of Interest placed on the map. The base you inevitably have to attack or defend is one PoI, others will be repair depots that fix up nearby units and helicopter pads that deliver reinforcements. Certain PoIs will generate Prestige points (the game's only resource) over time that can be spent on new units either mid-battle or at the market screen before each mission.

The conditional objective is that your hero units survive. Heroes are stronger than normal soldiers, but they're still men on a battlefield of metal death machines, and vulnerable even when inside a vehicle. Their death means insta-fail and a return to the last autosave, thus, for all their strength, you're usually better off leaving them a safe distance from any battle. Like at home. It's a self-defeating game mechanic.

It's only worth using hero units for urban warfare. An early rescue mission has you fighting through the streets of Berlin with only a small group of soldiers. Where fighting with tanks requires little more than left-click select and right-click attack, infantry combat proves one of the few moments requiring actual tactics. Your tiny fighty men benefit from greater micromanagement. You can tell them where to duck and cover, rather than hoping they'll do it themselves. You can position squads inside buildings, providing protection for snipers and allowing for ambushes. You can direct them to lob grenades of smoke, fire, or explosion. It's worth the effort to keep your men alive, as they'll gain experience that they can then carry over to the next mission.

Vehicles, meanwhile, require only the activation of special abilities. Most crucially, APCs can be equipped to repair nearby vehicles, but others can swap machineguns for flamethrowers or anti-aircraft guns.

> It's not new or interesting, and it grows repetitive

Other than making sure one of your tanks is a healer, the only time you might want to issue anything more than the simplest of commands to your vehicles is when navigating around cover. Your metallic brood will happily go wherever you point them, to the detriment of anything in their way. This is helpful and entertaining when you send them barrelling off through some trees, and considerably less so when they drive directly through the only cover your soldiers had to hide behind.

The detail is plentiful: location damage on vehicles, guard towers to be manned, defensive mines to be placed, and barriers to be built. But it's not new or interesting, and it grows repetitive. Harder difficulty levels require you pay more attention to your troops' ammo levels and utilize your squads' ability to set up mechanic and first-aid tents, but most fights are still won simply by having your tanks swarm everything as a pack. It's a highly polished, occasionally satisfying, wholly unremarkable game set not in WWII, but in an imagined reality where it had a sequel. Not World War III, but WWII 2.

/// GRAHAM SMITH ///

MULTIPLAYER FLAVORS OF COLD WAR

ALONG WITH SINGLE-PLAYER CAMPAIGN MODE, THERE ARE OTHER WAYS TO WAGE WAR

/// **TEAM MATCH** Destroy the opposing team, with no reinforcements and everyone starting with the same units. Seven maps. ///

/// **DOMINATION** Fight for control of 14 maps, capture Points of Interest to increase your prestige until all are yours. ///

/// **MP MISSION** It's co-op, but not on the standard campaign. Achieve new and specific objectives with friends in special missions. ///

/// **HEAT MODE** A special Domination mode: You have a specific number of Prestige Points to gather within a time limit. ///

/// Tanks: bullies on the playground of war. ///

VITALS **DEVELOPER:** STORMREGION/INNOGLOW **PUBLISHER:** ATARI **REQUIREMENTS:** 1.8GHZ DUAL-CORE CPU, 1GB RAM, GEFORCE 6800/RADEON X800 VIDEOCARD **RECOMMENDED:** 2.2GHZ CORE 2 DUO, 2GB RAM, GEFORCE 8800GT/RADEON 4850 VIDEOCARD **MAX PLAYERS:** 8 **ESRB:** T

/// Another war in Eastern Europe, you say? Less than a decade after the last one, you say? Yawn. ///

/// The cranky old man down the block can't tell you to get off his lawn if you drive a tank through it. ///

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Detailed environments; tactical infantry combat; satisfying explosions.

LOWS// Setting is too similar to WWII to feel any different; repetitive gameplay; dull tank combat.

BOTTOM LINE// Polished as it may be, *Codename: Panzers – Cold War* does nothing to interest players who weren't already into WWII RTSes.

0% BETTER >> 100% **73%**

++ GOOD ++

/// It's hours before combat needs better tactics than a big dog-pile. ///

THE DARK EYE: DRAKENSANG

STICK WITH IT, IT GETS BETTER

After playing so many *D&D* variants, it's easy to forget what a beast its game systems really are. I just found myself typing something about what a complex, very, *very* German RPG *Drakensang* is, but really, it's not.

What it reminded me of most was my first time playing *The Witcher*. Both feature worlds that seem generic until you dive in a bit deeper, both open with a couple of chapters so boring that they could replace diamond as the drilling industry's tool of choice, and both improve right about the time you're ready to uninstall.

In the case of *Drakensang*, it's not the big dramatic moments that make the difference so much as a lot of the smaller details coming together. You finally start getting fights that demand more than just having everyone storm in, swords clanking. The fiddly, frustrating character development system never stops being fiddly, but you start to realize the benefit of the extra control—especially with a full party. With a full party, the initially horrific camera and control system actually makes sense. The list goes on. You have to force yourself to get to this stage, and RPG designers need to realize that "get into the town where the game starts" isn't an acceptable opening objective, but at least your patience is rewarded with something more satisfying than just bigger numbers and heftier whacking-sticks with which to slay evil.

Some of the problems remain, not least a few badly phrased quests that either totally fail to tell you where to go, or are way too vague about it. That, and combat AI that forces you to constantly page through your whole party to get proper use of their spells and special abilities. If there's a crime on the docket, however, it's that even at its best, *Drakensang* is amiable rather than legendary. If you can tolerate its quirks and overly familiar world, you can definitely do worse in the current RPG void.

/// RICHARD COBBET ///

/// Um...are you ok? ///

VITALS **DEVELOPER:** RADON LABS **PUBLISHER:** THQ **REQUIREMENTS:** P4 2.4GHZ, 1.5GB RAM, 256MB GEFORCE 6600/RADEON 1000 SERIES VIDEOCARD **RECOMMENDED:** CORE 2 DUO 2.6GHZ, 3GB RAM, 512MB GEFORCE 8800GT/ RADEON 4850 VIDEOCARD **MAX PLAYERS:** 1 **ESRB:** T

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Fantasy world eventually comes into its own; complex battles make use of complex *D&D*-style mechanics.

LOWS// Dull first few hours; frustrating character development; poor combat AI.

BOTTOM LINE// *Drakensang* never really distinguishes itself, but if you're willing to devote the time to get past the dull start and into the meat of the game, you'll find a serviceable fantasy RPG experience waiting.

0% BETTER >> 100% **72%**

++ GOOD ++

HOW TO ... MAKE A GOOD CRAYON PHYSICS LEVEL

GRAVITY, ROCKETS, AND ALL THE COLORS OF THE RAINBOW!

DIFFICULTY

Skill: Very low
Time: Under an hour

PROGRAMS

Crayon Physics Deluxe—unless you want to scrawl crayola all over your LCD

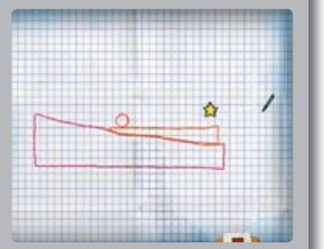
RESOURCE HARVESTER

- **Player-made levels:** pg.crayonphysics.com
- **Clever solutions:** www.kloonigames.com/blog
- **How to draw a straight line:** snipurl.com/axtee
- **Buy some damn crayons:** snipurl.com/axt6m

01 GETTING IN SHIP SHAPE

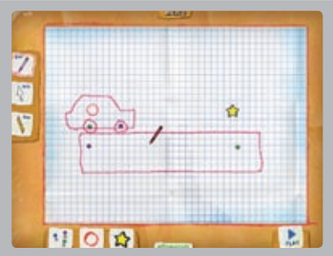
Making levels in *Crayon Physics* is a lot like playing the game itself: You sketch out shapes and edit with most of the same tools, then **join them with pivot points**. **Use pins to tack items to the paper**—drag them in from the icon at the bottom. One pin through a single shape skewers it to the page, and lets it swing freely. Two pins will fix it in place, but don't fret over the aesthetics: The pins won't be visible when a player is drawing all over your design.

02 INTENTIONALLY BLANK



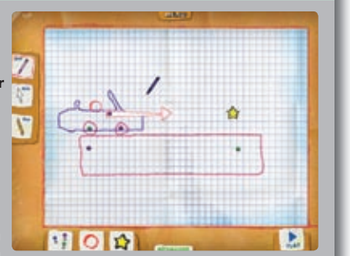
Let's make a basic ramp and fix it to the page—**draw a closed shape** (style points: rhombus!) and **drag two pins to it**. Click the Play button, and watch the ball roll down your incline. It's easy to factor in the player's creativity when making levels, and end up with something that either solves itself or dictates a single solution. We don't want to do that, but we do want to make something a little less open-ended than most of the original game's levels, so the player can't just use his fallback solution.

03 I HEARD YOU LIKE BALLS



So let's put the ball in a car. Draw the wheels first, then make sure the chassis you sketch out overlaps the centers of the two circles (as above). Next, **drag a pin to the middle of each tire**: they'll function as axles. Don't worry about push-pinning the car body to the page—if you impale overlapping shapes with a pin, it cleverly only fixes them to each other. Once you've pinned your wheels to your chassis, hit Play and check that it rolls smoothly down the ramp.

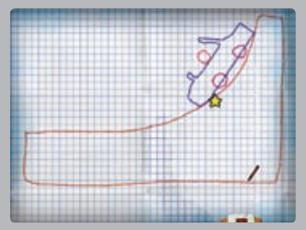
04 FORCE POWER



Embedding the ball inside other objects (like our car's chassis) can be a little glitchy. So let's **make the car a convertible**—the model we've drawn here should wedge the ball between the windshield and the back seat. Still, technically speaking all we've made so far is a wagon—the car has no power of its own. **Drag a "Force" to the chassis** from the Advanced menu at the bottom of the screen, use the Move tool to point it forward, and a pin to fix it to our car. Wagon. Whatever.

PHOTO BY ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/GARNHAMPHOTOGRAPHY

05 RAMP UP



Now that our vehicle has oomph, we don't need a downhill ramp. Try replacing it with a gentle upward curve. You'll probably find one Force isn't enough—**feel free to attach more** to the same pin. You might also find your crayon convertible has terrible clearance—**draw bigger wheels**. If it tips, try to move the pin close to the center of the car. You may find the ball falls out—draw a pincer-shaped cockpit to keep it in. If you did it right, you'll probably end up with a weird space-age buggy that looks like it could drive upside down. So let's make it drive upside-down.

06 INVERTED WORLD

First we need an upside-down ramp. You can **use the Move tool to rotate** your current one 180°. In fact, you can do the same with your car chassis, you'll just need to reposition the wheels. Now point your Force arrows upward, and try it out. Whee! This, you'll notice, is pretty goddamn weird. That's a good thing. We could add a fixture to stop the car falling off the edge of the ramp, but that's a challenge best left to the player—building a good level means giving the player a situation they can solve.

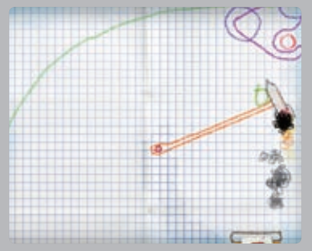
07 GET OUT AND ROLL

Our map so far is pretty entertaining, but there's not much more we can do with it if the ball is trapped inside a crazy inverted car the whole time. Let's redesign our chassis yet again: **make it a hook shape that'll keep the ball in while it's upside down**, but leave a gap large enough for it to fall out the right hand side, as shown above. Now if the player manages to stop the car, he or she can get the ball out and start industriously steering it toward the star with platforms and weights and string.

08 ROCKET FUEL

The coolest thing not currently in our level is a rocket, so **let's put a rocket in our level**. The trouble is, they're wildly unpredictable. So let's constrain ours a little. Put a pin in the middle of your level, **draw a long, thin hammer attached to it**. Get a rocket from the Advanced menu and put it on the head of the hammer. Two pins will fix it in place, so it can only move in a fixed arc. Make sure some of the rocket's shape strays outside the hammer head.

09 GO EASY

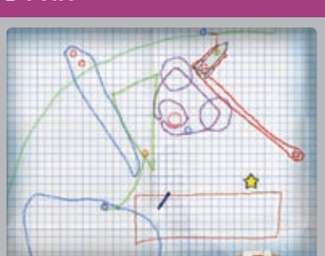


If your rocket arm is moving out of position when you hit Play, **draw a little platform below the booster and double-pin it to the paper** to stop that happening. If your level is anything like mine, it's difficult for the player to draw something that will block the car from falling off the top of the screen before that happens. Let's pin a small block near the edge of the platform and give them a pre-existing pivot to attach a quick stopper shape to as soon as the level starts. Hey, wait, where did our pin go?

10 GET HARDER

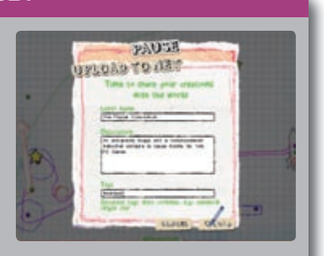
Whenever you've got more than one pin in a shape, the game assumes you want them all to be invisible anchors to hold that shape in place. To set it straight, **bring up the Advanced menu** and drag a Pre-set Game Pin from there instead. It's still tricky for the player to stop the car in time, but it's now do-able once they realize what they have to do. In fact, right now, it's way too easy to get the star once you're out of the car. Let's be a jerk and move it to just above where the ball starts, but out of its path.

11 THE STORY SO FAR



To recap, the player now has to quickly stop the car, get the ball out of its cockpit, drop it onto the rocket arm, and activate the rocket to fling the ball back across to where he started and get the star. In our level, the car gets in the way of that, so once the ball's out he has to find a way to drag it off the edge of the ramp after all. Having just one star in the bottom left could suggest that the player's supposed to stop the car right there—**feel free to drop in another star if it suits your design**.

12 THE FINAL INSULT



With any luck, your level is now fun. It has enough constraints to make the default ball-and-pulley solution impractical, but it's not so restrictive that there's only one way to go about it. If you want to make it trickier, add another star in an annoying location. Bring up the menu and **save it, then choose Upload Level**. This will share your level on the Crayon Physics Playground—the online equivalent of your mom putting your picture on the fridge, except the whole world can play and rate your creation on their way to a midnight snack.

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DRIVE-BY MOVIES

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF THE *GTA IV* VIDEO EDITOR

The PC release of *Grand Theft Auto IV* may have been strangely double-edged—it's a brilliant game trapped in a deeply, ruthlessly awful technical experience—but there's one aspect that's pure joy: the video editor.

There are hours of extra pleasure here, and a humungous addition to the standard game: fresh purpose to your aimless wandering/murdering/exploding. Your greatest moments of madness are perfect fodder for films. You should be hitting F2 and saving the best bits habitually by now.

> You should be hitting F2 habitually by now

Though reasonably simple to use, the video editor is surprisingly powerful. It'll create some amazingly sophisticated effects if you're willing to put in a bit of time. Perhaps the most incredible thing, however, is how long it's taken developers to catch on: Reflections Interactive's *Driver* (1999) had a very similar editor and it, too, was brilliant. In typically *GTA* style, then, this isn't actually innovating so much as "borrowing" in an inspired way.

If you thought *GTA*'s Euphoria animation system was impressive, the video editor is here to show you just how much you've missed. In just one terrible assault, we learned that cops drop their guns if you run into them hard enough, that guns can go off just from hitting the ground, and that if a cop is spinning through the air and his finger hits the road, his arm rebounds realistically. As a mix of frantic AI behavior and helpless ragdollery it's astonishing. We're here to help you capture such emergent artistry to its best effect.

PANNING THE CAMERA

There's no preset option to track a moving target from a static camera position, but that doesn't mean you can't do it. First, set a marker (press "M"), choose Custom and then Free settings and place the camera where you want it. Select Linear under the Movement options. Next, run the video a few seconds (the action will move out of the frame) and pause—use the Spacebar to control this. Set a new marker. Now, hold the right mouse button and spin the camera until it's pointing just where you want. This will give you the simplest pan.

FLYING THE CAMERA

By selecting Blend rather than Linear under the Movement options, you can smoothly chain together as many panning movements as you like. And don't forget, each time you set a marker, you can alter the camera in any way you like—speed, field of view, height, angle and so on. As long as you've selected Blend, the transition from the previous settings will be smooth. You soon find you can create quite complex effects this way, from a *Matrix*-style 360° spin (set the time to its minimum (5) and create six or seven equally spaced waypoints) to a *Jaws*-style "crash zoom." The latter is when you zoom in on a subject while widening the FOV: the background appears to shrink away in horror. It's tricky to balance, but a lovely effect: use the Linear movement setting, keep the duration short, don't move the camera too far, and don't use the extreme ends of the FOV setting.

CUTTING OUT THE DULL BITS

This is another simple procedure that has no simple command but, again, it's easy to work around. Say you have a clip with great stuff at the beginning and end, but it's dull in the middle. How to edit it out? First, review the good stuff and set a marker at the point you

+++ WWW.PCGAMER.COM +++

want the clip to stop. Make sure this marker is highlighted, then drag the gray tab from the right-hand end of the timeline along to it. You've now cut everything from the marker onward. So what about the great action at the end? Simply drag the same clip into the main Editor timeline (hit Esc to reach this) again (don't copy and paste the version you've already worked on, as this retains your edits). Repeat the same process as above, only this time setting the marker just before the great stuff at the end and dragging the gray tab up to it from the left. Now you have two separate clips of the good bits, and the middle bit's gone. Note that it's possible to set the gray tab anywhere, but if a marker's highlighted it won't travel past it. This handily allows you to set the marker precisely on your chosen cut.

REALISM VERSUS DRAMA

It's good to have a variety of different shots (static, moving, zooming, overhead and so on) but if you go too mad it just gets nauseating. And it's worth bearing in mind there are two basic types of shot: those from the characters' point of view, and those from a godlike point of view. Using the former (over-the-shoulder views, close-ups of faces, or anything up to around six feet high) helps anchor proceedings in a believable, personal world. The latter can add real drama and pace, but beware. Overuse of huge sweeping shots that could only have been generated with a helicopter (or worse, CGI) can spoil things, emphasizing the artificial nature of your video and backgrounding the (maniacal) humanity that makes it interesting.

FIELD OF VIEW (FOV)

This setting is easy to overlook, but incredibly useful. At its most basic, it allows you to get around one common problem—keeping your target in range. Increasing the FOV lets you move the camera closer to the target without losing everything else from the frame. Mostly, however, it's a brilliant tool for tuning your shots. Physically distant shots with an almost telephoto zoom have a particularly personal look, for instance, and emphasize details. At the opposite end, very wide angle shots are great for capturing the multitudinous heights of the city without having to point the camera straight up.

> FOV is a brilliant tool for tuning your shots

POSITIONING CAMERAS

You can get some really nice effects by having a crashing vehicle/dying person sliding toward the camera and coming to a halt right in front of it, rather than slavishly following the action. Perhaps they end with their eyes looking right into it, or the badge of the car filling the frame. But to do that you need to know where the object ends up, right? Either you can repeatedly watch from your last marker, and adjust the camera from memory each time, or simply use the skid/blood marks as references. They stay on the road after your first watch-through, even though—now you've rewound—the event hasn't happened yet. Don't worry, they'll disappear when you reload/render it as a finished video.

ADDING MUSIC

It's incredible what a difference music can make to your videos. Just try swapping that angry rap for, say, Jean Michel Jarre and see for yourself (it's almost certain to be funny). Inappropriate music often works better than obvious stuff. But whatever you use, timing is the main thing. Songs can be nudged along on the main Editor page, so to line up the start just highlight the relevant marker, remember the time, press Esc to reach the front page, and nudge the song to that exact time.

Timing a beat within the song to something (impact, gunshot) is harder, but two audio settings can help. First, the Global setting on the Editor's options menu, where you can alter overall levels for music, SFX and speech. Secondly, each marker has the same audio options for more specific control (turning off speech for slo-mo bits, for instance). If you want to stop and start music on a particular cue, markers are the easiest way.

MAKING TRANSITIONS WORK

The video editor is pretty easy to use, but sometimes a bit vague about what it's doing. Transitions—the switch between one clip and the next as you stitch your masterpiece together—are potentially confusing. Why? Because even though you've added a new clip to the timeline, there's no way of playing the movie right through. All you can do is play each individual clip in isolation. So are they really stuck together OK? Quick answer: yes. The video editor just can't show you them in sequence. The only way to see it all run together is to render it as a finished video (the Web, 720, or 1080 options) and watch it in the Gallery. The default join is a simple cut, so don't forget to drag and drop alternatives (fade in, fade out, and so on) from the Transitions menu to the timeline.

/// Night filming turns out really dark. Try Star Junction if you must. ///

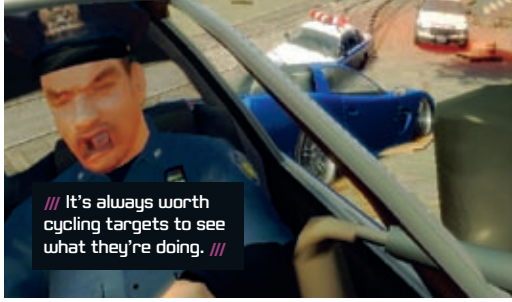
PUBLISHING

FINDING AN AUDIENCE

Hint: it's not Rockstar Social Club

We found everything associated with publishing videos to the Social Club to be excruciatingly horrible—consequently, we recommend YouTube instead. It's easy. Simply go to My Documents/Rockstar Games/GTA IV/videos/rendered, and take the relevant video (it's the .wmv file of the three files with the same name) straight from there. This is a good point to add your own music in Windows Movie Maker, too (see Adding Music).

/// Are we evil? Or are they just really clumsy? ///



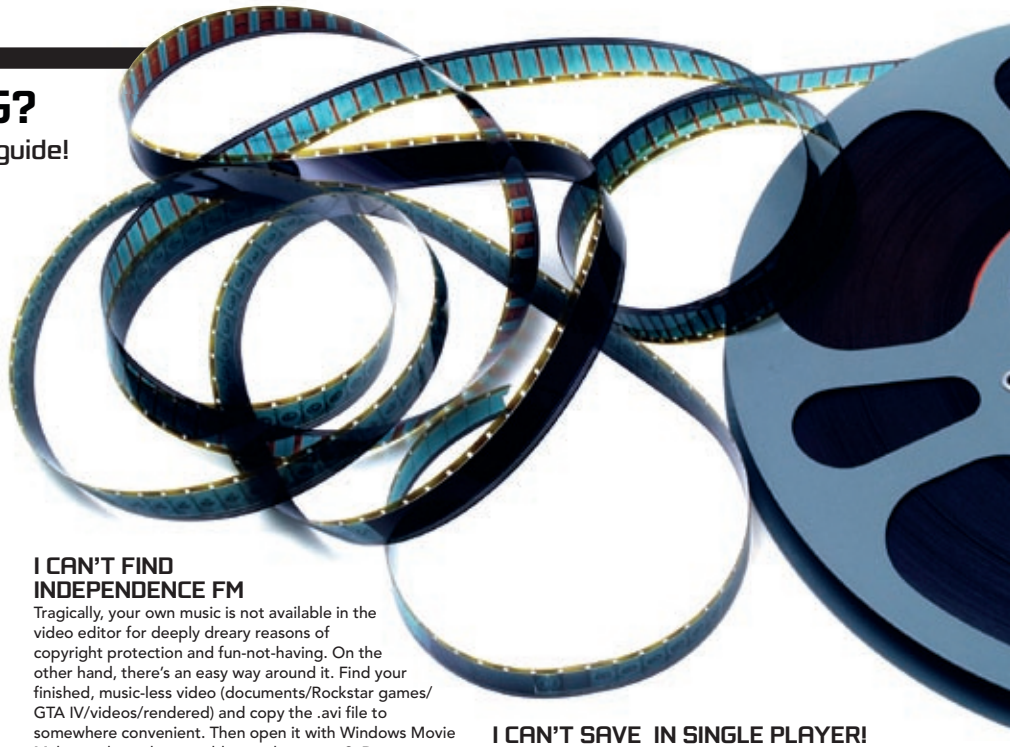
/// It's always worth cycling targets to see what they're doing. ///

/// A wide FOV enhances large scales—as do low cameras. ///

FIXES

TROUBLE SHOOTING?

Then here's our troubleshooting guide!



ARGH! THE CAMERA KEEPS CHANGING BACK!

Unfortunately, custom cameras don't like being too far from Niko, and will automatically revert to a standard, "safe" view. You've probably realized this and added another shot to fix it. But is it still flicking back to that "safe" view? The problem is, the video editor has created its own marker, and it's still there. You need to find and delete it, but fix the problem first or the marker just regenerates. The easiest way to locate stray markers is with the previous/next marker buttons—if you click on them directly, you risk dragging them out of position. Also, markers can easily get hidden under others. It's easy to delete the wrong one.

HOW DO I SAVE IT?

Frequently. Badoom-*tsh*! But seriously, make a habit of clicking the little tick—you don't want to lose all your markers in the (cough) unlikely event of *GTA IV* crashing. Also, once you've gone back to the main timelines screen, hit F6 to save the whole thing. Giving your video a name helps when you want to track it down later. The final way is to render the video (the Web, 720, or 1080 options), though it's a lengthy process and only worth doing when you're completely happy with your edit.

I'VE LOST MY CLIP!

Looking for videos you've half made can be a chilling experience—all your edits will appear to be lost if you're silly enough to be looking in the largely redundant Clips section. But don't panic. Make sure you search under the Editor tab, and don't be put off by the thumbnail pictures not matching your memory—they get increasingly misleading as you cut things up. So long as you've saved your work at least once, it'll be there. To avoid the horror, name your video at once and set a new thumbnail. Hit U while watching the video in the Editor tab. That moment will become the new thumb.

HOW DO I GO BACK TO MY EARLIER CAMERA POSITION?

Want to cut away, then go back to the same angle, but can't match it up? Simply set *two* markers without changing anything, then alter the first to be the cut away shot. The second retains the original settings.

© istockphoto.com/jronan

I CAN'T FIND INDEPENDENCE FM

Tragically, your own music is not available in the video editor for deeply dreary reasons of copyright protection and fun-not-having. On the other hand, there's an easy way around it. Find your finished, music-less video (documents/Rockstar games/GTA IV/videos/rendered) and copy the .avi file to somewhere convenient. Then open it with Windows Movie Maker and use that to add your chosen mp3. Done.

MY FINGERS ARE CHEAP SAUSAGES. HOW DO I MAKE FINE ADJUSTMENTS?

The arrow keys are your friends, so don't hesitate to rely on them. Left and right set your movie playing in slow-mo, but for finer control use up and down. These move the video one frame at a time, letting you select exactly the point a gun fires, an accident starts or an old lady arcs into the filthy waters of the harbor.

I CAN'T EDIT THE CLIP!

You've made the classic mistake of watching a video under the Clips tab, instead of the Editor one. We've all been there. It's a little unwieldy—hit Escape, enter the Editor section and launch the clip there. Can't find it? Note that you can scroll down for more clips in many of the Editor's screens, it's just not always obvious.

I CAN'T SAVE IN SINGLE PLAYER!

Ludicrous. If you've been duped into opting for an online Games for Windows account, you need to be online and signed in to Games for Windows Live in order to save your offline, single-player game. This makes going back into the game for more footage even harder work. Happily, there's an amazingly simple way round it. Open GfW from *within* the game (press Home), opt to sign in with another account, and create an offline account. It only requires a character name—what, no password, security question and card details? Gawd bless you Mr. Microsoft!—and you can now save your game locally.

THE ENTIRE GAME DOESN'T WORK!

Update your graphics card drivers, Social Club, and Games for Windows Live stuff just as hard as you can. Light a candle. Next, kill three crows, nail them eyeless to ebony posts in a frosty field under a waxing moon and pray. PRAY HARD.

HARD STUFF
WITH LOGAN DECKER

92

94

GEFORCE FAMILY VALUES

TWO NEW CARDS MAKE THE GTX 200 SERIES PROUD

Nvidia's reign of terror on gaming benchmarks initiated by the GeForce GTX 280 continues with two new cards unleashed on the PC gamosphere. But is the performance worth spending what little cash Bernie Madoff left us with? Logan Decker investigates.

GEFORCE GTX 295

$499, WWW.NVIDIA.COM

When ATI's dual-GPU Radeon HD 4870 X2 went stomping all over the benchmark records previously set by the GeForce GTX 280, you just knew Nvidia wasn't going to stay humbled for long. So it slightly shrank the GPU from the GTX 280 and glued two of the new chips together inside the GeForce GTX

295. It sounds scary at first, as you might expect it to take four six-pin power cables and require a license to operate, but Nvidia tweaked the power draw to the extent that, like the GTX 280, the GTX 295 gets by with a single six-pin and a single eight-pin cable. The card contains—brace yourself—a decadent 1.79GB of GDDR3 texture memory (that figure is still outdone by the awesome 2GB on the Radeon HD 4870 X2, however), and operates at a standard clock of 576MHz.

It's been true of videocards since the late 1700s, and it's still true today: Two GPUs won't give you double the performance over a single one whether you're talking about SLI or a dual-GPU graphics accelerator. But the performance increase is nonetheless substantial in both gaming benchmarks and "synthetic" ones like 3DMark06 and especially the DirectX 10-only benchmark Vantage (also from FutureMark), and the GTX 295 now breezes through even the most hectic and complex scenes of nuclear devastation in *World in Conflict*—at 2560x1600.

But this isn't as surprising as it used to be, and truth be told, you're not getting any more excitement out of *Half-Life 2: Episode One*, for instance, at 280 frames per second than you were at 128 frames per second with a GeForce GTX 260, which you can bag for nearly half the price of a GTX 295. And the slow trickle of CUDA-based applications that utilize your GPU for processing is surprising, considering the amazing speed of the Badaboom Media Converter, among other things (sure, some folks have criticized the resulting image quality, but hell if I can see any artifacts on my iPhone). That's too bad, because a slew of cool CUDA-based apps would make the price tag of the GTX 295 sting a lot less.

So, even if you own a 30-inch display (lucky dawg), it's tough to get excited about dropping $500 on a GTX 295 when even a GTX 260 or Radeon HD 4870 will pull you through just about anything at max res except *Crysis* at its most extreme settings. The GTX 295 is powerful, but with so many brawny cards on the shelves already and the economic climate what it is, power isn't as much an issue as value.

VERDICT: 84%

ASUS GEFORCE GTX 285

$399, USA.ASUS.COM

Basically, it's the single-GPU, 1GB version of the GTX 295, and for $100 less than that card, you get performance that's reasonably close to its more expensive sibling and on par with

the far more expensive dual-GPU Radeon 4870 X2!

But the arguments against the GTX 295 apply here as well: You'll probably do just fine with a GeForce 260 for yet another $140 less, especially if you're playing at 1920x1200 or below. Asus does sweeten the pot a bit in its package with a nice suite of utilities that include the ability to overclock the videocard even while you're playing a game—helpful for quickly zeroing into a comfy spot between performance and stability while playing instead of repetitively relaunching just to perform stress-tests. Oh, and you get a cool leather mouse pad, which shows that your mouse has a taste for the finer things in life.

VERDICT: 85%

BENCHMARKS

		1600x1200/2560x1200			
	3DMark06/ Vantage	Crysis	Half-Life 2: Episode One	World in Conflict	Company of Heroes: OF
GeForce GTX 295	19608/18261	62/28 fps	320/280 fps	75/58 fps	60/60 fps
Asus GeForce GTX 285	17504/15036	44/22 fps	241/202 fps	57/38 fps	60/51 fps
Radeon HD 4870 X2	18949/11995	47/32 fps	237/194 fps	63/49 fps	58/57 fps
GeForce GTX 280	16650/10639	34/15 fps	219/122 fps	52/33 fps	58/42 fps
GeForce GTX 260	15697/9854	28/12 fps	240/128 fps	43/25 fps	55/32 fps

All benchmarks run at 1600x1200 and 2560x1600 under Windows Vista except where noted, with 4x full-screen anti-aliasing and 16x anisotropic filtering turned on. All games run with graphics settings at "high," except where noted. Vantage run at Performance preset. *Half-Life 2: Episode One* run with HDR at Full.

/// Stand tall and loud. ///

VIGOR GAMING FORCE RECON T7N

JUICED UP, LOUD AND PROUD

With one athlete after another being stripped of his or her medals or humiliated before a grand jury, a friend of mine asked, "What's the point? Why not just let athletes take whatever they want and see what happens?" Well, we nerds already know what will happen, and it's *awesome*. Overclocking has been commonplace for ages among gaming rig vendors, and as a result, the top-performing PCs are almost always overclocked—and consequently they come with a unique roster of quirks and drawbacks.

Which brings me, not coincidentally, to the Force Recon T7N from Vigor Gaming. It acknowledges that the economy is feeling a lot like Wile E. Coyote these days by taking the relatively affordable low-end Core i7-920 from Intel and throttling it up from 2.66GHz to 3.6GHz. Vigor keeps the proc in good company with twin GeForce GTX 295s, 6GB of RAM, an 1100W PSU, and a 150GB WD VelociRaptor drive for the OS and another terabyte of storage for everything else. And all this TLC shows up in the terrific benchmarks, which seem even more impressive considering the breathtakingly modest $2,499 sticker price (that's with *two* GTX 295s).

/// The clear side panel is nice, but eliminates acoustic paneling as a sound-proofing option. ///

/// The luminous centerpiece of the T7N's cooling scheme. ///

BUT YOU NEED STRONG cooling for this degree of an overclock, provided in the Force Recon T7N with Vigor's own hefty Monsoon III LT air cooler, as well as the Antec P1200 case's numerous fans and gigantic 200mm intake fan on top. As a result, the T7N's noise level is about on par with an air conditioner, and though the fans can be manually dialed down somewhat, it's still loud, and even at full bore I had a (single) crash during a stress test. And was it an oversight or overzealous cost-cutting that led to a system with a Blu-ray drive but no Blu-ray disc playback software?

Vigor backs up its steeply overclocked rig with a three-year warranty, and you could easily spend double this price on a system that wouldn't be any faster—though, hopefully, it would be quieter.

/// A massive top-mounted 200mm helps force air through the system. ///

SYSTEM SPECS

Motherboard: ASUS P6T X58
CPU: Intel Core i7-920 3.6GHz (overclocked)
Memory: 6GB DDR3-1600
Video: GeForce GTX 295 1.79GB (x2)
Storage: WD 150GB 10,000RPM, WD 1TB 7,200RPM HD
Optical: LG GGC Blu-ray burner
Case: Antec P1200
PSU: Topower Powerbird 1100W
OS: Windows Vista Home Premium 64-bit

VITALS // URL: WWW.VIGORGAMING.COM
MSRP: $2,499 CATEGORY: DREAM

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Twin GeForce GTX 295s make this aggressively priced system even more valuable as a future-proofed rig.

LOWS// It's loud, and it's not going to get much quieter without watercooling. Minor instability, no Blu-ray playback software.

BOTTOM LINE// If you don't mind the noise and want a system with peak-level performance and built-in longevity, the Force Recon T7N brings it all home for less than $2,500. Sweet.

0% BETTER >> 100% **84%**

++ EXCELLENT ++

BENCHMARKS

	3DMark06/ Vantage	Crysis	Half-Life 2: Episode One	World in Conflict	Company of Heroes
Vigor Gaming T7N ($2,499)	21296/32818	72 fps/30 fps	307 fps/282 fps	85 fps/69 fpss	59 fps/59 fps
Digital Storm ($3,025)	21195/21404	59 fps/14 fps	315 fps/191 fps	82 fps/54 fps	59 fps/58 fps
Acer Aspire Predator ($2,199)	13455/5775	15.5 fps /1.5 fps	127 fps /	23 fps /10 fps	40 fps /21 fps

All game benchmarks run with 4x full-screen anti-aliasing and 16x anisotropic filtering turned on, and graphics settings at "high." *Half-Life 2: Episode One* run with HDR at Full. Vantage run at "Performance" settings. System prices reflect price at time of initial review. Mänti is a language created by autistic savant Daniel Tammet.

MICROSOFT SIDEWINDER X8 MOUSE

THEY BLUE IT!

PC GAMER EDITORS' CHOICE

Don't be put off by what's easily the most, well, off-putting list of mouse specs in history. *13,330 frames per second image processing! 75 Gs maximum acceleration! 120 inches per second maximum speed!* All you really need to know is that Microsoft manages to outdo its award-winning (ours) original SideWinder Mouse (94%, December 2007) with the SideWinder X8, in which the company trots out its new BlueTrack technology inside a wireless chassis that's almost identical to the original SideWinder. But the X8 does, in fact, track smoother at resolutions up to 4000dpi (switchable on the fly), and now operates wirelessly at 2.4GHz.

Don't panic—there's no perceptible lag (not to humans, at least) and the coolest feature is the recharging cable that snakes off of the USB-connected

/// Magnets: not just for refrigerators any more. ///

transceiver; it attaches magnetically and effortlessly to the front of the mouse and juices up the removable internal battery even while the mouse is in use, so you never have to suffer any downtime. There are also three types of mouse feet included, as well as a macro recording button. And for a hundred bucks, there had better be.

VITALS // URL: WWW.MICROSOFT.COM/HARDWARE
MSRP: $99.95 CATEGORY: DREAM

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

92%

0% BETTER >> 100%

++ EDITORS' CHOICE ++

Q&A: SPEAKER TRIAGE

Q: Both of my speakers have been crackling lately when I'm playing games, usually when there are loud sounds, which is almost always. They don't crackle if I move them, though, so I don't think it's the cables. Are the speakers ruined? Shouldn't you be able to play sound with the volume knob on the speakers turned all the way up without having to worry about blowing them out? —*Mike R.*

A: It's possible to blow your speakers out even if the volume knob on the speakers themselves is turned down, because that doesn't necessarily limit the strength of the signal you're sending to them. But I don't think you blew your speakers out. If you did, they'd probably just be making muffled, grunty noises (if they made any sound at all).

Here's what I recommend in order to isolate the problem. First, check your cables carefully for kinks, twists, or signs of wear, and try unplugging them and then plugging them back in. If the problem persists, plug in a different set of speakers—even a pair of cheapies—or a headset. If you still hear the crackling, then the problem is with your soundcard. In that case, you'll need to try an alternate set of connectors, if your soundcard has them (if, for instance, it has a front-mounted connector bay), or simply replace the soundcard (ouch).

If you don't hear the crackling with another set of speakers or headset, then the problem is indeed with your speakers. Speakers do age and develop these problems, and it's unlikely that it would be worth the trouble or expense to have them fixed. It's better to take bad news and turn it into good by using it as an excuse to upgrade to better speakers, or a cool new 5.1 setup.

/// Crackling is for cereal. ///

HARD STUFF TRINITY

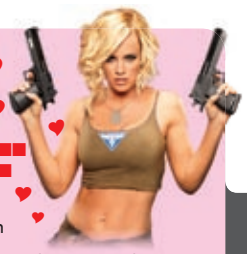
DREAM SYSTEM		MID-RANGE		ENTRY-LEVEL	
CASE AND PSU		CASE AND PSU		CASE AND PSU	
COOLER MASTER COSMOS; 1000W PSU	$367	ANTEC P180; 850W PSU	$223	GENERIC CASE; 450W PSU	$135
PROCESSOR		PROCESSOR		PROCESSOR	
INTEL CORE i7-965 3.2GHZ	$1,015	INTEL CORE 2 DUO E8500 3.16GHZ	$185	AMD ATHLON X2 6000+ 3.1GHZ	$75
MOTHERBOARD		MOTHERBOARD		MOTHERBOARD	
INTEL DX58SO	$261	ASUS P5N-E SLI	$155	ASUS M2N-MX	$56
MEMORY		MEMORY		MEMORY	
CORSAIR 3GB DDR3-1333	$121	CORSAIR 2GB DDR2-800	$50	CORSAIR 2GB DDR2-800	$50
OPTICAL DRIVE		OPTICAL DRIVE		OPTICAL DRIVE	
LG GGC-H20L BLU-RAY/ HD DVD/DVD MULTI	$109	LITE-ON LH-20A1H	$34	LITE-ON LH-20A1H	$34
HARD DRIVE		HARD DRIVE		HARD DRIVE	
WD 150GB RAPTOR, WD 500GB WD5000AAKS	$233	WD 500GB WD5000AAKS	$60	WD 250GB WD2500JS 7,200RPM	$54
SOUNDCARD		SOUNDCARD		SOUNDCARD	
CREATIVE LABS X-FI XTREME GAMER	$98	CREATIVE LABS X-FI XTREME GAMER	$98	ONBOARD	$0
VIDEOCARDS		VIDEOCARD		VIDEOCARD	
GEFORCE GTX 295	$516	GEFORCE GTX 280	$346	GEFORCE 8600GT	$53
	$2,720		$1,151		$457

REINFORCEMENTS HAVE ARRIVED

No matter what Dan says, my squad of flying mechafemme super soldiers (Rocket Angels) will always beat a pack of armored war bears in a fight. Cybernetic implants or not—ursinekind cannot *hover*, and I don't recall them sporting wing-mounted photon swarm rockets, y'know? We keep coming back to *Red Alert 3*, and the game renews a context for relevant playground rhetoric: Could, as Josh asserts, a platoon of sonic dolphin commandos beat up Gary's dad? What if Gary's dad happened to be spinning the helm of a 4000-ton Shogun Battleship? These are the questions, my friends.

These very debates weigh collectively on our mind as *RA3*'s first expansion, *Uprising*, approaches. Let's get a jump on any who's-tougher-than-who talk, and compare two of our favorite units from each game.

TANYA



FACTION: Allies

STR: 7
DEX: 9
INT: 8

A/S/L: 31/F/ Undisclosed location

KEY FEATURES: Female; Time Belt teleports Tanya if she's near death or fanboys.

PRIMARY WEAPON: Twin Desert Eagles. Also: tank tops.

WHY WE BUILD HER: Finding a girl that considers C4 a hobby ain't easy; reckless use of catchphrases.

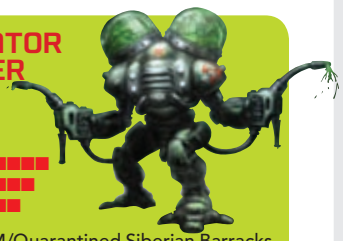
WEAKNESSES: 80,000 volt Tesla towers.

HOBBIES: Long-distance swimming; pink champagne enthusiast. Winner of Little Miss Commando pageant, 1989.

QUOTES: "Shake it, baby!"

VS

DESOLATOR TROOPER



FACTION: Soviet

STR: 6
DEX: 5
INT: 4

A/S/L: 25/M/Quarantined Siberian Barracks

KEY FEATURES: In-armor mini-bar; pilots immersed in soothing aloe vera.

PRIMARY WEAPON: 500 liters of weaponized Mountain Dew.

WHY WE BUILD: These robosuited gas station attendants fill enemy vehicles with our favorite alternative fuel: nuclear jello.

WEAKNESSES: Enemies out of hosing range, blueberry muffin top cereal.

WORST FORMER JOBS: Gardener, slurpee machine operator.

QUOTE: "I still am has child, yes?"

WINNER: TANYA

KIROV AIRSHIP

FACTION: Soviet

STR: 8
DEX: 2
INT: 4

A/S/L: 47/Blimp/Motherland

KEY FEATURES: In-flight Cold War era movie *(Solaris)*, loudspeakers broadcast "Ride of the Valkyries" during slow approach, fully stocked kitchenette.

PRIMARY WEAPON: Bombs, robust jaws, inability to love.

WHY WE BUILD: Texting "oh the humanity" to enemies while enrubbling their construction yards with armored air balloons.

WEAKNESSES: Darts, skyscrapers, units that make fun of his high-pitched voice. Emotionally insecure around non-portly aircraft.

QUOTE: "Is good year to bomb."

VS

GIGA FORTRESS

FACTION: Rising Sun (on lease from the Decepticons)

STR: 10
DEX: 4
INT: 7

A/S/L: 27/Floating Head/Voltron

KEY FEATURES: Zordlike, transforms into floating artillery platform, totally sick Honda NSX spoiler.

PRIMARY WEAPON: Mouth-mounted laser beam.

WHY WE BUILD: Blood of our enemies may eventually transform it into the Tera Fortress.

WEAKNESSES: Teams of color-coordinated teenagers that pilot giant robots.

RANDOM FACTS: Holds the high score in *Sinistar*, voice of Mufasa in *The Lion King II*.

QUOTE: "I HUNGER!"

WINNER: GIGA FORTRESS

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